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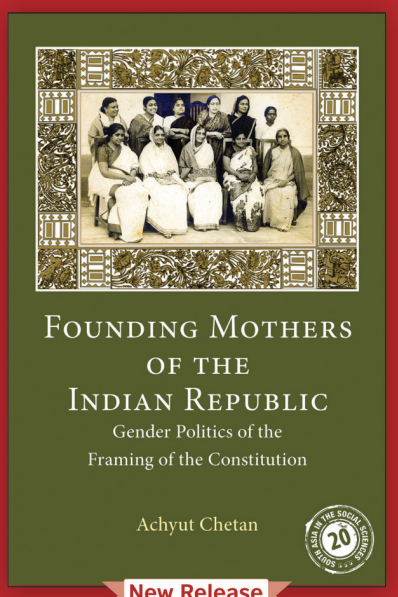

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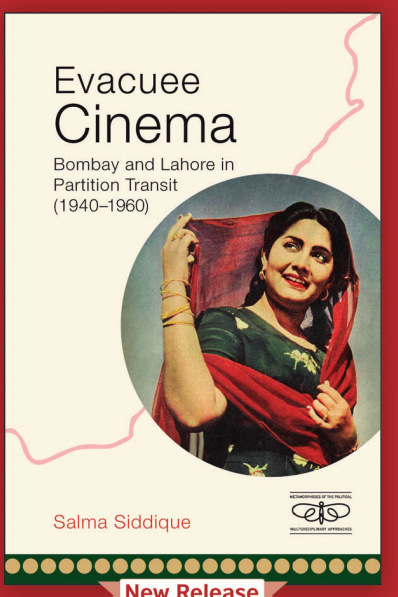

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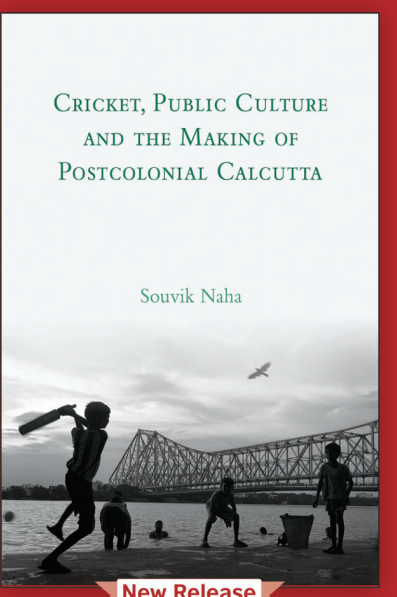

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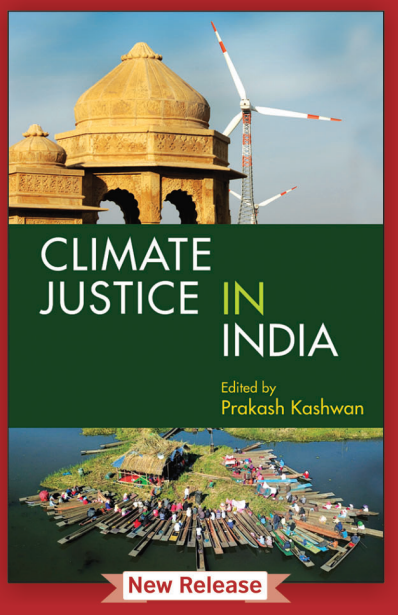

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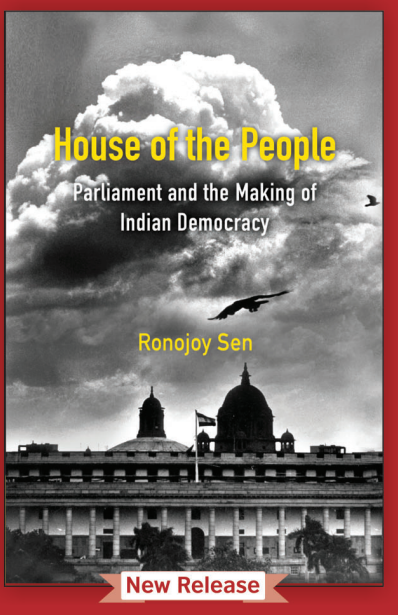

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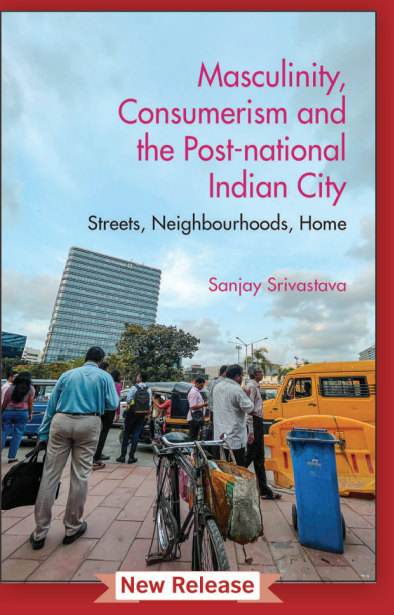

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Lata Sangade, active in theatre for 15 years, has learnt the nitty-gritty of theatre from Guru Ravilal Sangade, her father. She now works with Muskaan, an organization working amidst vulnerable communities in Bhopal, and has been teaching theatre and music to children there.
Lovis Simon worked with Eklavya Foundation in Bhopal for three years and is currently pursuing Master's degree in Teaching and Learning programme from Åbo Akademi University, Vaasa, Finland. Currently, she is exploring two languages: Finnish and Swedish.
Madhuri Purandare, an internationally acclaimed artist and writer, studied Art (Painting) from Sir J.J. School of Art, Mumbai and French from the University of Pune, then Paris, and taught French for over 18 years in Alliance Française. She has written and illustrated many books for children as well as adults; translated from French to Marathi and vice-versa. She is the first author to receive the very first 'Big Little Book Award' in 2016.
Malati Mukherjee is a writer, translator and sometimes a poet, based out of Nilgiris.
Manika Kukreja is an enthusiastic children's book reader. She likes to read fictional tales and believes in the significance of expression of experienced events and emotions articulated through realistic fictional stories and non-fiction.
Manjiri Nimbkar, a medical doctor, became a teacher after 10 years of medical practice at Pragat Shikshan Sanstha's Kamala Nimbkar Balbhavan in Phaltan, Maharashtra. She has developed Pragat Balshikshika Abhyaskram and Pustak Maitri Abhyaskram at PSS with her team.
Manjusha VGVS, an electronics and communication engineer, has been working with tribal children since the last four years. Currently, she is working with Eklavya Foundation.
Manoj Nigam, an Assistant Engineer, is Executive Officer at Eklavya, engaged in disseminating quality education material since over 25 years. He has been publishing articles in well-known journals and online portals on social, environmental and educational issues.
Melody Xalxo has an MA Degree in Education from Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, and now works with Eklavya Foundation in Pipariya Block of Hoshangabad District, Madhya Pradesh. Her areas of interest are nature education, children's literature, and painting.
Mihir Pathak is a passionate educator & storyteller working with children and teachers since the last nine years. He is interested in project-based experiential learning and theater in education.
Mudit Shrivastava is Assistant Editor with *Rang Samvaad*, a magazine focusing on arts and culture in Bhopal. He writes stories and poems.
Neera Jain, editor and writer of storybooks for children, is the author of *They Made History* (Ratna Sagar). She has edited *The Take-Off and Other Stories* by Indian Cyclists.
Nidhi Gaur is associated with Ektara, Bhopal. Her research interests include Gandhi's Nai Talim, science pedagogy, and gender studies.
Nidhi Gulati is Professor, Department of Elementary Education, Institute of Home Economics, University of Delhi.
Nilima Sinha is a writer of repute of children's books.
Nita Berry writes short stories, picture and activity books, historical biographies and full-length non-fiction for children of all ages.
Nitika Meena is working in the field of education with Eklavya Foundation for over five years now.
Nrupesh Patel has worked in Library Program for grades 1 to 5 in rural tribal schools. He is part of Pitara (Books Store) in Gujarat, run by ARCH.
Partho Datta teaches at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.
Parul Batra Duggal lives in Bhopal and is associated with Azim Premji Foundation since the last nine years where she works in government primary schools on language learning and teacher capacity building. Prior to this, she worked with Room to Read for four years where she was involved in setting up libraries in government schools and developing quality children's books. She has published both stories for children and reflective essays based on her work with children.
Pavithra VS works in the education sector as a teacher, trainer, content developer and a parent mentor. Currently, she works as an education consultant with a social enterprise.
Priyatosh Dutta, a college teacher, likes to reach the younger generation through popular lectures and presentations on many topics including 'Learning can be Fun'. A number of such videos are available on his YouTube channel, 'priyatosh dutta'.
Proiti Roy graduated in fine arts from Kala Bhavan, Viswa Bharati, Shantiniketan in 1987. She worked as a graphic designer in advertising–both in India and Bangladesh. She has also worked with handicrafts in recycled mediums and taught art and craft to children in Kolkata for 12 years. Now living in Shantiniketan, she illustrates and designs children's books.
Proma Basu Roy works in the children's literature sector with Parag, an initiative of Tata Trusts.
Radhika Chhaparia completed her MA in Education from Azim Premji University, Bengaluru in 2018. In March 2020 she joined a small school based on J Krishnamurti's questions (near Bengaluru) and continues to teach there.
Rajni Dwivedi currently works with Azim Premji University. She is Assistant Editor to the university magazine *Pathshalaa, Bheetar aur Bahar*. Her areas of interest are to know more about children and about the way they learn different things.
Ragini Lalit is exploring what it means to create critical learning spaces for children and young adults, in a way that centers hope and compassion. She is particularly interested in the use of children's literature and performing arts in education.
Ranjana Kaul is former Associate Professor of English in the College of Vocational Studies, University of Delhi, Delhi. She has translated numerous novels, critical articles and short stories from Hindi and Kashmiri to English.
Rashmi Paliwal has worked with Eklavya since 1983 as a member of the team that developed a new curricular programme in social science for middle-school level. She has been involved with many national and State-level efforts in textbook and teacher development.
Rina Goel is an ex-journalist and marketing professional, a lover of books and the written word.
Ritika Gour, a writer, filmmaker, and literature critic hailing from Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, received the honourable jury award at Dada Saheb Phalke Film Festival for her film *World Zombied*. She has also written for the screen in different mediums from films to documentaries.
Rohini Rangachari Karnik teaches French and holds a law degree. She is interested in art and culture.
Ruchi S works with the Teacher Education and Outreach Advocacy Programme at Eklavya.
Sachin Saxena works with Eklavya Foundation in Sukhtawa, a small town in Hoshangabad district of Madhya Pradesh. He is interested in science popularization among children through experiments, and by making science toys from easily available materials. As a part of the Kesla Middle School Science team, he is trying to understand the students and community attitudes toward forest ecosystems, knowledge about

ecology, and direct experiences with forests.
Sandhya Gandhi-Vakil has been involved in writing and telling stories for children, translating stories from English into Hindi.
Sanket Raut is working as teacher educator at IISER, Pune. He is involved in various wildlife surveys and research projects across the country.
Sarthak is a lawyer based in Bhopal. He also works with environmental groups on climate and pollution-related issues. He occasionally writes on the issues of nuclear risks and workers' self-management.
Serena Shah, age 13, is studying in the 7th grade in the Cathedral and John Connon School, Mumbai.
Seema, an editor, translator, and an avid reader of literature for children, works with the Children's Literature editorial team at Eklavya. Her interest lies in challenging existing social norms and stereotypes.
Shailaja Menon is a language educator who currently leads the Center for Excellence in Early Literacy at Tata Trusts. She has spent more than a quarter of a century researching, teaching and writing in the areas of early language, literacy and children's literature.
Shailaja Srinivasan is a Bhopal-based children's book editor and enthusiast. In her spare time, she loves gardening.
Shals Mahajan is a writer, activist, layabout, part feline, somewhat hooman genderqueer fellow who lives in Bombay. Their published works include *Timmi in Tangles, Timmi and Rizu, A Big Day for the Little Wheels, The Mighty (Little) Hunter*, *Reva and Prisha*, and *No Outlaws in the Gender Galaxy* (co-authored).
Shashi Sablok has studied Statistics and is currently associated with the Ektara magazines, *Cycle* and *Pluto* and other children's books. She is also a translator.
Shivnarayan Gour has been working with the publication team of Eklavya Foundation, Bhopal, since the last eighteen years.
Shivam has a Master's in Sociology and Bachelor in English Literature from Ambedkar University, Delhi. He is currently working with Muskaan as a Youth Programme Officer. He facilitates English language classes and discussions around contemporary socio-political issues with the youth of the schools and slums.
Shivani Bajaj, a linguist by training, is currently Advisory Faculty and Mentor with the Library Educators Course, Parag Initiative (Tata Trusts). She has worked with the Primary Education Program of Eklavya, MP and on Adult Literacy with Nirantar, Delhi. She translates and edits for *BBB—Bookworm Beyond Borders*, a quarterly newsletter for Librarians published by Bookworm, Goa.
Shivani Taneja has been working amidst people of denotified tribal backgrounds and impoverished communities in and around Bhopal for 25 years. A teacher at heart, she enjoys being part of a classroom every day in Muskaan, thereby observing and learning from students' responses to any pedagogic intervention.
Shubhangi Pandit, a qualified computer science engineer who served the IT industry for a decade, is a Steiner teacher by choice. She took care of the pedagogy at a homeschool collective in Bengaluru and treasures her class-teachership with her students for the entire 8-year cycle as a gift and an absolute privilege.
Shubhra Seth is Associate Professor at the Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi, Delhi.
Simran Sadh has an MA degree in Education, with specialization in language learning from the University of Delhi, Delhi.
Swaha Sahoo is India Country Director for STiR Education, an international non-profit that supports education systems focused on motivating every child, teacher, and official to learn and improve. Previously, she has spent a decade with the Tata Trusts leading the Parag Initiative.
Tanaya Soni is an undergraduate student at the University of Warwick pursuing her Bachelor's degree in Politics and International Studies.
Tarika Chari is a 9th grader from the American School of Bombay who loves to read books, enjoys listening to music, writing poetry, eating Japanese and Korean snacks, and finishing off a procrastinated essay.
TCA Avni is a freelance editor based in Delhi.
Teji Grover, an important and widely anthologized voice in Hindi poetry, is also a fiction writer, translator and painter who has developed her own repertoire of ecological colours extracted from natural substances. She has introduced some of the most significant modern Scandinavian writers and poets to the Hindi reader.
Toolika Wadhwa is Associate Professor, Education, Shyama Prasad Mukherji College for Women, University of Delhi, Delhi.
Tultul Biswas is with Eklavya Foundation, engaged in designing learning opportunities, workshops, short courses for teachers and grass-root level education activists, and in bringing about changes in classroom practices.
Vaibhav Parel teaches English at Hansraj College, University of Delhi, Delhi.
Vineeta Bal has worked as a researcher in immunology in different academic settings within and outside India, including the National Institute of Immunology, New Delhi. She has written profusely on immunology, feminism, science and society, women and health, primarily in English and Marathi. She is associated with many civil society organizations.
Vishesh Unni Raghunathan is not to be mistaken for a rhinoceros. He is a poet and Chartered Accountant from Chennai.
All illustrations from the 2 Big Books: *Bazaar* (Prashant Soni) and *Khichadi* (Durgabai Vyam) published by Eklavya.

Editor's Note

We bring to our readers this special issue of *The Book Review* devoted to Children's Literature as we have done every year in November (14th November has been celebrated as Children's Day since the times of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister) since the inception of the journal in 1976. Putting together this issue every year is its own reward as every book, every illustration is a source of joy. We at *TBR* are proud to declare that this is perhaps the only platform devoted solely to books for the young. In recent years, we have adopted the practice of inviting a guest editor to put the issue together, and among them have been Dr Padma Baliga, who succumbed to Covid in 2020. And TCA Avni who brought her youthful enthusiastic fervour to bear in editing the special issue in 2021. We would like to thank Tultul Biswas and Ruchi S of Eklavya for agreeing to guest edit the November 2022 issue. As they say in their editorial, it is a feast they have brought to our readers.

Chandra Chari Uma Iyengar

Before the Feast Begins...

Isn't it so difficult to write? Have you ever seen an introduction or a preface written for a feast, or for a treasure trove for that matter? How do you introduce such things… without revealing the secrets?... without robbing the thrill of reading the original pieces?… without repeating the oft-repeated?

Writing an editorial for this issue was as difficult a task for us.

उगो उगो शलजम ...मीठे–मीठे शलजम
Ufff!!!!!!!
We kept thinking, kept struggling…

ऐसे सोचा... वैसे सोचा...
पूरा ज़ोर लगाकर सोचा...
मगर रास्ता निकल न पाया !!!!
फिर मन में एक ख्याल आया...

And finally we thought, why don't we leave it to the readers to familiarize themselves with the contents of this issue? After all, however much we introduce, now that you are here, you will get to know the colour and size and shape and the million moods of the books reviewed, the reviews themselves and the reviewers only when you dip your fingers into the contents of this issue and taste what is written here.

So come…

We welcome,
Your thoughts, questions and ideas…
Your experiences and the lenses they may have created for you…
Your struggles…
Your values and viewpoints…
Your agreements, disagreements and objections…
And your criticism…
Are all welcome here.

We welcome,
Your culture, language and beliefs…
Your skin colour, caste, religion and geography…
Your love, gender, sexuality and all other affiliations…
Your children, your parents, your siblings and your friends…
Your marginalizations and your privileges…
Your successes and failures…
And your dreams…
All are welcome.

We welcome,
Your uniqueness…
Your eccentricity…
The fear lurking in your minds…
The wounds and scars and pains you may have borne or caused…
The insecurities you may be struggling with…
And your worries…
Are all welcome here.

Welcome to this world…
Full of innumerable windows and mirrors,
and sliding glass doors...
Of books of diverse kinds…
And colours, and flavours and moods,
Of happiness, laughter, guilt and melancholy…
We welcome the diversity you bring to this world.

(The framework of this poem is borrowed from an unpublished verse which reached us via a long journey of mouth to ear… to mouth to ear. Incidentally, the name of the writer remains a mystery for us. The Hindi verse also apes the story *Shaljam* published by Eklavya.)

Thank-yous…

At the onset, we would like to thank Chandra Chari and Uma Iyengar for entrusting us with the exciting task of guest editing this issue.

We are also deeply indebted to each of the reviewers who have contributed to this issue, and some have done this at very short notice, amidst many other responsibilities. We are happy that, apart from Hindi and English, children's books in Marathi, Telugu, Bangla and Bundelkhandi have also been reviewed, in our attempt to make the issue more inclusive and representative of children's literature (CL) in India. Some of the reviews came to us in Hindi, a few in Bangla and Marathi. We thank the translators—Aneesh Lavalekar, Laltu and ourselves! The issue also carries commentaries on CL in Marathi, Gujarati, Bangla, Telugu and Konkani. Some were presented as talks in an event organized by Ektara Trust in Bhopal in October 2022. We thank all the authors.

The world of children's literature appears to be a story of many silences, denials, absences. This led us to invite articles from those who are working, not only in the domain of children's book writing and publishing, but parallely in some social field that informs their practices. You will find three articles that try to foreground crucial areas that all of us engaged in children's publishing need to care about and act on. Others discuss some important aspects regarding use and promotion of CL. We thank each of the writers—all comrade-in-arms!

We wanted to interview many authors and illustrators we have admired. However, in this issue, only two find the light of day. The others will appear somewhere, some day... Thanks to Apoorva Raje for help in reading proofs, Kamlesh Yadav for meeting our urgent picture scanning demands and Satish Kumar for making endless corrections.

A whole section of reviews of books on Education had to be shifted to the next issue, as the reviews and articles swelled. A big thanks to the reviewers and will read you in the December issue of *The Book Review.*

The cover illustration by Kanak Shashi and design by Ishita Debnath Biswas reflects children and childhoods still struggling, and yet full of hope and determination, to find their space in children's books. Thanks to Ishita for reading and understanding our thoughts and demands.

Our conversations with CN Subramaniam helped us find faith in our ideas and pursue them. Thanks, Subbu.

Lastly, a loud shoutout to our team-mates in Eklavya, and our family/house members, who accepted our absence from everyday work and late night editing stints with smiles and support.

Tultul Biswas

Ruchi S

Stories for a More Humane World

By Shivani Taneja and Ragini Lalit

We live in a country where too many of children's realities include not having money to buy what they need, walking long distances to collect firewood, going out to fish for their evening meal, or not having a dry corner to sleep or sit in the house when it rains. These life experiences often include incidents of being displaced by those in power, or being discriminated against by the institutions that are meant to protect, like schools, police, judiciary, health services, local governments.

Privilege often renders this world invisible to us, creating a warped understanding of situations and people. But given that these experiences of persistent structural barriers exist in every aspect of many children's lives, the absence of caste, abuse, stealing, sexuality, class among others in children's literature, raises the question: whose childhood or which childhoods are we talking about in our children's books? And equally or more important, who (all) are we writing for? Krishna Kumar, eminent educationist and former NCERT director, prods us when he emphasizes on examining childhood from an Indian lens and suggests that children's literature in India needs to build its own path.

Stories create more opportunities than one could begin to list and explore within an article. But in a country as fragmented and diverse yet interconnected as the one we live in, what we focus on here is the need for diversity in our children's books for the critical purpose of stories enabling us to understand others and finding ourselves in books. Narratives and stories 'help us understand who we are, and how we are to behave. They show us how to live and die, they show us what community and friendship mean', a reflection by Anne Lamott (1994) strikes a chord at this point. Similarly, Huck (1987) reminds us that, 'Literature has the power to take us out of ourselves and return us to ourselves a changed self, to enlarge our thinking while educating our hearts.'

The Silences in Children's Literature

Many times among adults, the dominant perception of childhood is one of 'innocence' or 'naivety'. This then guides our perceptions in discussing children's literature, and children's supposed innocence is pointed at as a perceived lack of subjectivity of any kind. Children's literature is expected to fit the tropes of being 'simple', linear narratives for 'tabula rasa' children who must be protected from violence, abuse and all kinds of structural conflicts.

It may be as recent as the last 10-15 years that the space of children's literature has allowed life-worlds of marginalized children and 'dark issues' to tread inside our books with richness and sensitivity.

Recently, the 2022 South Asia Book Award for Children's and YA Literature went to *Born Behind Bars* by Padma Venkatraman (Nancy Paulsen Books, 2021), a story about a 9-year-old child growing up inside a jail and then on the streets. Prior to this, we see some stories where lack of material goods comes up sensitively while giving a voice and agency to its characters in *Untold School Stories* (Anveshi, 2008) or *The New Sweater* (Muskaan, Eklavya, 2015). Gogu Shyamala's book, *Tataki Wins Again* (Anveshi, 2008) talks of the abuse that a dominant-caste landlord inflicts on a girl for daring to water her fields before his, and books like *Panchhi Pyara* (A and A Book Trust, 2010), *Meri Zoya Chali Gayi* by Richa Jha (Eklavya, 2018) or *Kya Tum ho Meri Dadi*? (Ektara Jugnoo, 2019) are some books which acknowledge experiences of grief and death.

We still don't have adequate stories of conflict, violence, anger but children engage with these 'issues' every day. In a seminar on diversity in Children's Literature held in 2019 in Bhopal, Azra Khatoon, who worked with children and young adults in the aftermath of the widespread violence that hit Muzaffarnagar shared that the children were 'drawing and expressing horrid experiences… these are not just isolated experiences that we can ignore them.' Picture books like *Mission Cycle* (Pratham Books, 2018), *Red* (Tulika Books, 2018) enable young readers to take part in life amidst conflict situations, curfew and unrest. Stories of this kind may bring some recognition to the lives of those who might grow up hurt and affected by similar experiences, as well as those who might hold dominant worldviews regarding such situations.

Similarly, while narratives of criminality and justice in mainstream media tend to take on a simplistic character, with seemingly obvious notions of right and wrong, in Children's Literature, we see a parallel attempt to teach moral lessons. A marked lack of nuance when discussing such issues tends to position people on extremes without really allowing them to engage with their own and others' non-normative behaviours, classifying them as blemishes or misdeeds rather than realities of many.

Where is My Story?

The gap between life at school and home becomes ever expansive when, for the children of marginalized communities, the forbidding space of school lends to an active absence of recognition and endorsement of themselves and their lifestyles. For a long time, children who have historically been ignored by Children's Literature have been offered literature that presents a window into the dominant narratives, into lives very different from one's own. And while windows and doors are important for all readers, seeing oneself visually and textually in stories, stories as mirrors, is essential for being valued, for being affirmed and to counter narratives that erase, caricaturize, marginalize, or present us as less than fully human (Bishop, 1990).

In the few children's stories where this is being corrected, we often find that the marginalized child is accepted and recognized only when s/he achieves something, be it a display of smartness, or bravery and we rarely come across literature where children have agency and are talking openly of the difficulties of their lives, be they middle-class and/or working-class lives. Rather, they are seen anxiously guarding the secrets and 'dark' areas of their lives.

Examining the genre of picture books, Khadeer Babu, the author of *Sir Ka Salan* (Anveshi, 2008), shares, 'it took so many developments in literature before a Muslim child could be the protagonist of a children's story book with his identity clearly and wholly expressed within the narrative.' Thus, in the Indian context, we can still count on our fingertips books that have been able to present well the indigenous, Dalit or a child of any minority group.

Authentic Representation

Being authentically represented in literature as political subjects with richness and sensitivity affirms the readers who find their experiences being mirrored, while also functioning as windows and potentially sliding glass doors where readers might meet actors who stand up or speak out even when it appears difficult. In Bama's *Mirchi Ka Chura* (Muskaan, 2021), we witness a day in Pachayamma's life, a feisty woman combatting the daily struggles of being a Dalit landless labourer in a village. Such literature, written

in one's own voice from one's own location, invites readers into the shadow-net that the narrative offers to think for themselves. *Basti Mein Chor* (Muskaan and Eklavya, 2020), a story born out of a classroom activity, gently interrogates who and what a '*chor*' (thief) is. In stepping into their world, we, as readers, are forced to examine our own beliefs.

Zai Whitaker, the author of stories like 'Kali' and the 'Rat Snake' (first published in *Cobra in My Kitchen*, Rupa Publications, 2005) shares, 'It is always a challenge when you are writing about these issues and these communities, to focus on the characters and not on your own emotions and develop them as people rather than as embodiment of issues.

The concerns regarding representation, who is being represented and what is to be done when the author may not personally agree with the views they are representing, are often also connected to the question of who we are writing for. Literature representing varied lives needs to be written as closely as possible to the way it is lived, rather than through the coloured mediation of the middle class. Be it Zai or Rinchin, author of *Vidroh Ki Chhap Chhap* (Muskaan, 2020), it is their own location close to the communities that enables them to do this job well. On the other hand, when the narrators come from within the locations that they write or illustrate about, the lens gets further strengthened; *School Mein Seekha aur Sikhaya* (Muskaan, 2021) is one example among many, of a young person's dilemma at not being able to find the safe space that she wants in her school. Such literature, when published, gives agency to its protagonists and enables those on the 'outside' to listen carefully.

Tasvir, a writer and poet from a denotified tribal group, Pardhis, reflects, 'Living this life is a journey. Through the good parts and the challenges, you are present in it, you are part of it, and that is why we are able to say it. How can an outsider experience and live all this and express this?' Laxman Gaekwad, Sahitya Akademi award winner, reinforces this differently, 'Till we don't present our stories, people won't be aware of us.'

As publishers, educators and parents, we take critical decisions on what a child gets to read. We might have our fixed forms and styles/structures maintained within which we are able to perceive stories, and often publishers mould narratives into this format. Instead, could there be more open-mindedness, and can we prepare new structures in keeping with the style of the story?

Receptivity to others' lived realities also implies listening in entirety to the content, the language and the way it is said. The originator of the story should then be part of the process from the beginning till it reaches the world outside.

Creating Writers through Good Books

Millions of children are in schools, accessing textbooks and storybooks. They are making sense of the written world through these books. They are also comprehending what can be written and what not. Therefore, as teachers, writers, parents and librarians, it is an important job to strengthen their inner voice.

Hemanta Dalapati, Odia poet and school-teacher says, 'If I had read literature about myself, our struggles, our fights, our culture, I might have written about my people, about Niyamagiri ten years earlier.' Elaborating, he adds, 'Publishing and speaking about your stories come through a journey. Experiencing life, writing and then sharing on this platform… This does not happen spontaneously. It takes support from many people, coincidences, and then things start changing.'

In our experiences of taking diverse children's literature to young readers from denotified and tribal communities, the discussions have always pointed to the nuances that young readers' understandings of justice, power, emotions, norms can hold. They can examine the violence at home as clearly as they understand the violence of the state. They can walk along a motley group of children looking for a lost cat or a lost friend. These are children as readers who are collectively and individually transacting with a text. When these stories are also their own or familiar enough for a dialogic safe space to emerge, their own lived experiences come forth. As adults, it is time to move back and merely facilitate these 'stories' to enrich our own understanding about our students and society, while they engage within and find words and forms to present their stories. This holds transformation potential.

Kenyan author, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), argues for writing in one's indigenous language, versus a hegemonic language like French or English (or Hindi). It would be a privileged mind which has a western concept of 'childhood' that guards the entries into 'literature' in the Indian context. We need to empower our children to read and write their own stories in their own languages and support in honing these skills and taking these stories further.

In conclusion

In the academic world of adults, theory often helps in giving a reason to life's unfolding, it helps explain many things that are beyond the making of one individual. Similarly, story books in children's hands can be a tool to understand life. When young readers engage with rich, authentic and sensitively written literature, usadults are reminded that children have as much, if not more, to offer to our collective understanding of nuanced issues. More importantly, it reminds us that if children grow up with diverse, critical and authentically represented literature, the work of healing can begin—as readers make sense of the text, they are learning how to embrace the stories of the perceived others and in turn humanizing themselves, and each other.

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Book News ***Book News***

Dancing With Birds, written and illustrated by Bulbul Sharma, asks: have you ever tried to dance with birds? The grumbling little lorikeet, the owl who can move his head every way, the woodpecker with the rhythmic pecking, the quarrelsome crow and the fierce eagle? Dance your way into a colourful and magical world of birds in this beautifully illustrated poetry book by artist and writer Bulbul Sharma.

Talking Cub, an imprint of Speaking Tiger, 2022, pp 20, ₹ 250.00

Children and Sexuality

By Nidhi Gulati

The idea that the child is asexual has been accepted as natural and atemporal for the entire history of modern childhood. Social and moral norms deem that not only families and child-focused institutions, but rather society at large reacts strongly to children's participation or interest in sex. The current discourses on sexual abuse overarchingly influence family and educational practices, causing parents and teachers to over-interpret children's interactions with their peers as the result of sexual abuse or as evidence of sexual violence and/or deviance. I do not intend to minimize or ignore the reality and effects of child sexual abuse, but seek to interrogate who a child is, and how a child's being and acting in the world are shaped by particular ideas. In this brief piece, I focus on the conceptualization of the child as asexual through denials and disregard.

Definitions of sexuality are situated in cultural, social, and frequently religious contexts and are influenced by adult conceptions of propriety. By definition, in the modern world, children's sexuality is expected to be absent or latent (Freud, 2017). Any interference with this social order leads to considerable anxiety, leading to a loss of 'morality' and 'innocence' (Levine, 2002; Postman, 1994). Egan and Hawkes (2009) note that in contemporary reform narratives, '... child's sexuality [has been] constructed as the result of a dangerous and socially unacceptable outside stimulus, and as a result, any realization of subjective sexual expression is rendered abhorrent and in need of adult intervention' (p. 389). The need to 'protect' and 'reform' children dominates the discourse (Gulati, 2018, 2022).

However, there are other perspectives on childhood that shy away from such rigid adult constructions. According to the deterministic perspective, pleasure, exploration, naughtiness and playfulness in middle childhood or adolescence are natural and 'developmental'. Human beings are sexual beings throughout their life and the biological and behavioural manifestations of sexuality unfold at different stages. The boundaries of childhood and adulthood are not so sharp and incisive as law and policy ordain; rather there is a seamless flow and continuity in development and change between child/adult stages. Children's experiences and stories co-exist with adult narratives.

Our knowledge of the child's development paints a different picture. Biological evidence corroborates that the ability to respond sexually is present at birth. There is an increase in sexual interest between the ages of three and seven. From the age of six to nine, genital play becomes covert. As a consequence of their inherent curiosity, children also discover fairly early that males and females have different genitalia. The expression of sexuality in childhood is not limited to biological underpinnings but can also be seen in their cultural world. In children's socio-dramatic plays such as 'play home' (*Ghar Ghar Khelna*), children learn about adult roles, marriage and long-term relationships. In enactments of 'doctor-doctor' or 'doctor-nurse', children participate in a heterosexual play.

Even though anxieties surrounding children's sexuality are indicative of wider threats to caste purity, the stability of marriage and family and gender norms, in this discussion, I limit the discussion to certain denials. The developing body is sexual, which is the first denial. However, the socio-cultural world finds it difficult to acknowledge and comprehend this biological and developmental givenness. By its social, political and cultural [and economic] construction, 'childhood innocence and sexual enjoyment are incompatible' and any hint of sexual knowledge and activity is the antithesis of a child's conduct (Bhana, 2007, p. 437; Kesby, et al 2006, p. 191). This notion is self-perpetuating, as '(of course) everyone knows that children have no sex, which is why they are forbidden to talk about it, why one closes one's eyes and stops one's ears whenever they show evidence to the contrary' (Foucault, 1976, p. 4).

What is forbidden in society is forbidden in literature for children too. From the standpoint of children's literature in India, sexuality remains a 'furtive reality that is difficult to grasp' (Foucault, 1976, p. 105), a mystery, a domain quite obscure. The books meant for children are contrived as sanitized and protected spaces, where no hidden dangers of knowledge about bodies, pleasure, or instincts lurk. Any attempts to transgress this leads to an uproar. This was evident in the reader's response to a recent text. *Watermelon Route* by Belgian author Quentin Greban was translated and published in Hindi and Marathi (2017). The text engages with the stirrings of love of the adolescent protagonist, Sassou. Sassou travels a long distance to gift watermelons to his love interest. *Watermelon Route* is an unusual text about romantic love and adolescence. Though the theme of love in childhood is a central theme in many texts–most of which engage with mother's love, sibling love or friendship–this text took a leap. The sweet, dreamy world of Sassou beckons to the beginnings of romance, albeit not socially acceptable in a children's text. The strong reactions to the book included not circulating it in public libraries in certain regions or halting discussions on it, saying–this is not our culture, it doesn't happen here. The reactions are indicative of the deep and fixed social anxieties and uneasiness around change.

The second denial comes to us through the accentuation of the issue in the context of our cultural ethos. The Hindu worldview celebrates '*brahmacharya*' and the overarching moral philosophy of self-control. The ethic of annihilation and conquest of desire by each individual is the telos of the ideal Hindu life. This largely governs the moral and social world. Though the principal mythological 'texts consistently attest to the primary importance of sexuality' (Kakkar, 2012), the Hindu religious teachers through the centuries have exhorted their followers to 'gather', 'concentrate', and transform the 'scattered and darkening' sexual drives into higher mental power (Ojas shakti). Sublimation and channelization are thus, the purpose of reconstruction of the Hindu male (sic) (Kakkar, 2012), whose celibacy is celebrated (John and Nair, 1998, p. 15). The training of the *pehalwan* (wrestler), an ideal figure, is an example of this sublimation and channelization: 'for the wrestler the *akhara* earth is the perfect nurturing mother in whose lap he plays as a forever virginal, non-sexual child' (Alter, 1992, p. 131). Further, the wrestler's role in social life as a householder is the socialization and shaping of children into adults, who can 'channel their emotions away from the intoxication of self-indulgent sensual gratification' (Alter, p. 187). Thus, in most walks of life, asexuality is valorize, and sexuality is useful to serve reproductive purposes.

In contrast, the women's sexuality is constructed and articulated through the '"desexualised" reproductive bodies as the ideal norm' as opposed to the other, '"immoral" and "disreputable" sexuality' (Anandhi, 1998, emphasis author's). Concomitantly, non-Hindu and 'tribal' populations are portrayed as prone to sexual 'excess' and notably lascivious in their interactions within the community and outside it. This construction is accentuated in the discourse of sexuality in the Indian subcontinent (Srivastava, 2004, p. 13).

Sexual diversity is unknown in children's texts.[1] This forms the third denial. The construction of an adult 'heteronormative' reality is constructed as the natural telos of any childhood interaction between a girl and a boy. Evidence from popular Hindi films produced after Independence reveals the operation of this denial in our cultural world. Up until a decade ago, much of Hindi cinema centres on the idea of romantic love. Film after film celebrates the coming together of the conjugal couple. Oftentimes, it is strangers who meet and fall in love. However, for a sizable number of narratives where the protagonists know each other since a younger age, the seeds for romantic love are sown in childhood. Childhood friendships between a boy and a girl in Hindi films are ordained to become adult romantic love, and this love is invariably heteronormative (Gulati, 2017).

When children are not given opportunities or rather denied knowledge about their nascent yet advancing sexual development, they are left with no choice but to cull information from media, which is unreal and very sexualized. As a result, children are poorly prepared to negotiate sex and protect themselves when they do become sexually active (Kesby et al., 2006, p. 194). Like adults, children 'see their lives through the prisms of the possible lives offered by mass media in all their forms' (Appadurai, 1996, p. 54). Fantasy is legitimized as a social practice as it finds its way into the 'fabrication of [our] social lives', where every day common lives are driven less by the inherent nature of things and more by the possibilities suggested by the media (p. 55).

The issue of sexuality necessitates a recognition, where the place-markers for children (and individuals) are subject to historical changes and reflexive transformations. Within the process of change itself, there is a deliberate engagement with a spectrum of cultural, economic, political, and 'global' processes and the conceptions of sexuality and the discourses that surround it. Thus, sexuality is accentuated as the crucial 'site around which social and cultural ideas may be expressed' (Srivastava, 2004, p. 10). Children can not only be seen to create and be created by culture but also 'endeavour to live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation' to the existing social order and structures (Butler, 2004, p. 30). From Butler's perspective, concerns about subjectivity, identity, and bodily integrity depend on a culture that acknowledges and supports their viability rather than being the result of one's desire or an act of will. Significant considerations about the moral requirements of social interactions and agency, in general, are brought up by this co-dependence between individuals and society. Co-dependence demands a rethinking of how we view our interaction with society, thus making space for transformation.

To conclude, we have internalized the image of the child as a completely asexual being. At the same time, there is a strict boundary, marked at the 18th/21st birthday, when a child metamorphoses into an adult, albeit a heterosexual one. Changing the landscape is not easy. The irony is that sexuality is all around us (and children) in public view, in songs, cinema, advertising and in homes. The world is sexual. We do not and may not acknowledge that children are sexual beings who live in a highly sexual world (Olfman, 2009).

However, in childhood, repression acts and enacts through the obliteration of any sexual activity, the discourse of protection, acts of prohibition and censorship of anything remotely sexual. The natural developmental realities go unrecognized in this sociological and political construction. At the social-familial level, the purpose of an ideal parent is 'to raise children … who are able to channel their emotions away from the intoxication of self-indulgent sensual gratification and towards a feeling of obligation to society at large' (Atreya, 1973; Alter, 1992, p. 188).

The step forward is to problematize and unsettle the discourse of protection that creates a child's sexuality as pathological. Feminist attempts to shift the discursive production lean towards a 'healthy' sexuality. State discourse is regulatory. Attempts made in school are 'educative' and therefore, reductive to a single dimension.

Hence, children's literature may be a legitimate space where the silence of matters complicated, including sexuality is broken, made mellow, benign and deliberate. It is the site where the social puritan view and virtue of the child as asexual be disturbed, the child's impregnable innocence of the mind be made strange. It is the site where the discourse of protection of children that legitimates surveillance and control is problematized, interrogated and hopefully stopped. Unlike the frenzy circus media creates, whether between adults or adolescents, hugs and glances, feelings and emotions, desires expressed or suppressed, may make for a gentle world within the covers of a child's book.

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1. Fiction for adults in India has a wide oeuvre of stories, in both, the little and big tradition focusing on multiple sexual identities. The range covers Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist and recent stories, letters, biographies in several regional languages. See Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai (Ed) 2008. *Same Sex Love in India: A Literary History.* New Delhi: Penguin.

I Want a Cacophony in the Library

By Shals Mahajan

There is a strange conflict in me as a queer trans writer and a queer trans reader of children's books when I think of books I'd like to see written, published and read.

As a reader, I want to see an explosion and not just a disruption. If I am allowed to dream of books, then there is no need for me to dream small. As with many of us marginalized due to the various structures of society like caste, class, language, gender, religion, region, ethnicity, ability, neuro-normativity, sexuality, to name a few, we have very little space to dream and to articulate our desires and dreams.

As a writer, especially as one who has been able to find a tiny foothold in the industry, I feel some amount of power in the ability to put some of my ideas into words. Many of the folks in the kidlit industry, especially the editors, come from the same sort of book-engrossed lives as many of the writers do, and so there is some amount of space at that level to bring in 'different realities'. The other few terms being 'inclusive literature', 'in our own voices', and 'writing about difficult themes'. And this is evident in the book festival circuit, panel discussions, and the way some of these particular books are marketed. So, we have more and more books with protagonists with disabilities, a slew of rebel girls who grow up to do things they were not allowed to do traditionally, books dealing with death, illness, divorce, and such like. There are fewer books, but they are there on different creation stories, depression, and even queerness.

However, I also know well that writing is but a small part of the process in the making of books. For any writer's words to reach children there is a legion of editors, publishers, distributors, stores, schools, parents—adults that mediate, and each of them with clear ideas of what is needed, acceptable, and/or profitable. This is an ecosystem that is geared towards social and cultural ideas and norms of what children need to know and learn and what is good for them. There are a few disruptions, but not only are they few and far between, even after publication they are easy to neglect and set aside in this enormous machine of production and consumption.

So when you look at the bookshelves in stores and the bestsellers lists, when you look at what the schools want and what the stores are afraid of advertising, and finally at the publishers catalogues, there is a smattering of these books in a large sea of the popular, the urban middle class and upper middle class families and adventures (cis-heterosexual savarna Hindu), schools of the like few children go to (urban with good infrastructure, no dearth of teachers though they may be monsters), of classic folk tales and religious tales and historical stories (largely savarna, Hindu, mainland, etc.), and of course, the well-meaning authors who have been elevated to the status of stars and thus have shelves devoted to them. All this, of course, after the shelves on shelves of English language bestseller series from the US and UK.

Even so, as readers, and writers, we are supposed to be grateful and overjoyed at this tiny space in these shelves and the odd lauding of a book or two on some occasions and talks about the future, which we are told, will be different. Perhaps it will be. Perhaps it will be more of the same. But I for one, am tired of these stories of acceptance and existence. Of these odd books where the queer characters spend their time coming to terms with themselves and attempting to get those around them coming to terms with their [gasp] difference. I am tired of books where [gasp] the straight parents are divorcing, and the progeny is coming to terms with it. I am deeply annoyed by books where persons with disability spend all their time coming to terms with [gasp] their disability. Or books from locations where all that can be talked about is their [gasp] different folk tales or clothes or food or language! I am so very bored of these gasps and the pats on the back for creating space for 'them'. And then taking these to children so that they too can see these differences and learn to be 'kind and inclusive'. Yes the discourse, it is a changing, but too slowly for many of us. And yes, we know we exist, your acknowledgement does not mean much.

So here is what I actually want—I want shelves and shelves and whole libraries of books where the stories of the various lives that are lived within us and around us abound. Where the urban sections are small, and not just from the towers. Where the stories are from multiple castes and communities and not just middle class savarna Hindus that are default. Where the rebellions are not against adults who are so weird and horrible that they must be vanquished (Roald Dahl is great, there are real monsters around us), but against the adults around who are full of good intentions and rules on what is good for children. I want books that disrupt and tear apart the normal, the normative, and the controlled. I want books that make us weep, get angry, want to smash things. Books that we can retire with for days on end because they give us what this world does not and might never.

I want books that question everything and not those invested in giving answers so that all feels good. And yes, I do want books that make me feel good because they are about real lives that are lived, not tokens of existence of the margins in a miasma of good little children being modelled to become good little citizens that live with blinkers to everything that is unjust, unfair and wrong around us. And yes, I want books of dreams. Of huge dreams that turn everything upside down and inside out. Books where access is built into the universe, where bodies are free to be, where connections are not scrutinized, and conversations are possible. I want books of joy, of laughter, of love, of conviction. As a reader, and a writer, I want the tiniest of the particular to help me know, with a kick to my head or a tug to my heart, not just how little I do know, but how hollow my pretensions of knowing are!

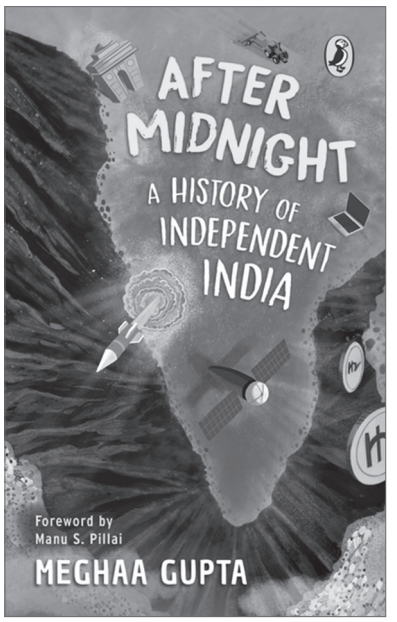
SAMUDRA TAT PAR KASRAT
By Shauril Rav
Children's Book Trust, 2022, pp. 18 ₹60.00

Samudra Tat Par Kasrat by Shauril Rav is a quick read with lots of colourful pictures and simple and easy to follow Hindi. The story is about a buffalo who tries to inspire his fellow animals (rhino, horse, rabbit, octopus, bear and some others) to getting into a fitness regime. This involves the buffalo demonstrating to the others exercises like yoga, kickboxing, aerobics and swimming. With some animals, like the octopus (with its tentacles) and the crab (with its pincers) complaining to the buffalo that certain exercises are beyond them, especially ones which require the use of hands and feet, the buffalo is put in a bit of a spot. He quickly recovers and instructs all animals to perform squats; this he mentions to the crab and octopus should not be tough for them as they can also use their pincers and tentacles respectively!!!

Bharat Kidambi

Partho Dutta

AFTER MIDNIGHT: A HISTORY OF INDEPENDENT INDIA
By Meghaa Gupta. Illustrations: Sayan Mukherjee
Penguin India, 2022, pp. 270, ₹ 399.00



In 1984, Rajiv Gandhi became Prime Minister and launched a far-sighted tech policy which subsidized and allowed the liberal import of personal computers. A PC at world prices was prohibitively expensive and still out of reach for most middle-class urbanized Indians. The subsidy and easy terms for a loan allowed many to own a chunky PC and institutions also gradually started converting. One fall-out was the empowerment and creation of a generation of computer literate and net (launched 1995) savvy Indians. India today is one of the countries that has the most number of skilled computer professionals and workforce anywhere in the world and demand for them in Europe and America is very high. If only this foresight, vision and policy had been implemented by the state in Independent India for primary education and basic health also, instead of the measly few percent that is still allocated in the GDP, we would have been a different nation. Meghaa Gupta has recounted this story, and her accessible primer on India after 1947 is a wide-ranging, clearly written account that confronts intelligently all the ups and downs in our recent history.

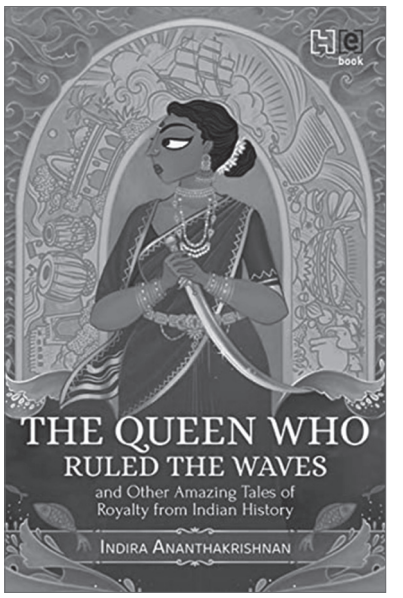
The more conventional landmarks in the history of post-Independent India—the Constitution, electoral democracy, voting, tensions with Pakistan and China, nuclear power and space projects are well documented in the book. A striking chapter is 'An Era of Protests' which begins with Dalit Panthers and ends with an insert on the Angry Young Man in Bollywood cinema (Amitabh Bacchan). The chapter on the Bhopal Gas Tragedy is another fine account on a human tragedy and industrial disaster which led to the Environment Disaster Act (1986).

Most young readers would find it hard to imagine an India before liberalization (1991). The book is valuable for this reason since it recounts the story of India's recent past and an India that was quite different from the one we know now. However, as Meghaa Gupta points out, while liberalization helped many to pull themselves out of poverty, the gap between the rich and poor increased dramatically. There has also been unprecedented polarization along religious lines.

No history of Independent India can be written without acknowledging Ramachandra Guha's magisterial *India After Gandhi* (revised edition, 2014). For young readers there have been good narratives by Archana Garodia Gupta and Shruti Garodia, *History of India, Mughals to the Present* (2018) and Roshen Dalal's *India at 70: Snapshots* (2017). Unlike the history of colonial India where the binary of colonialism and nationalism are firmly entrenched, for our recent past many stories run together uncontrollably. It is indeed tough to write a comprehensive narrative, and Meghaa Gupta has done an admirable job without underplaying the significant themes of economy and ideology. Some broad trends are found in the last few chapters of the book which confronts contentious issues like the Shah Bano case, the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the revocation of Article 370 in Kashmir. All of these have to do with the fate and future of Muslims and minorities in India. Her approach is frank and sensible and she manages to convey the enormity of the issues at stake for secular India. Her closing lines on this theme are full of hope and promise: 'If we continue to appreciate the things that unite us and celebrate our diversity—TV serials, Bollywood movies, literature, music, food—secularism will persist, and we shall continue to be enriched by the incredible plurality of our land.'

Ilika Trivedi

THE QUEEN WHO RULED THE WAVES AND OTHER AMAZING TALES OF ROYALTY FROM INDIAN HISTORY
By Indira Ananthakrishnan
Hachette India, 2022, pp. 192, ₹ 399.00



The annals of Indian history are rich and expansive, filled with the most amazing tales of both valour and idiosyncrasies. School textbooks often gloss over these incidents because it is impossible to capture all of these tales in one comprehensive text and also because textbooks need to build a cohesive narrative, a sequence which may not grasp the complicated and interlinked histories which spread across time and space. Enter *The Amazing Tales of Royalty from Indian History* by Indira Ananthakrishnan which shines the light on some of these royal kings and queens, whose stories deserve to be shared with the children of today.

This book tries to compile unheard tales from all parts of India but one must appreciate how the author has focused on kings and queens from South India, who are often overshadowed by the North Indian-centric history books, canvassing around 'Dilli'. The book brings tales from the Pallava, Chola, Hoysala, Maratha and Vijaynagara Empire. With South India comes the importance of its temple architecture and the author has taken great care to recount the faith and commitment of the South Indian royals. Stories about the building of the rock-cut structures at Mamallapuram including the Shore Temple, and the iconic Brihadeshwara Temple show the skill and initiative of these emperors and the builders. Readers get succinct accounts of royals like Kattabomman and Swati Thirunal of Travancore, whom one may not have heard of before, but who truly deserve their own space in historical records.

It is easy to observe that the author has presented many stories of queens and princesses, stories that don't really get much attention, simply because they may not be about kings who traditionally fought battles. In fact, the book begins with a story about the courage of an elderly poet named Avvaiyar. Among these, the story of the dancing Hoysala queen Shantala Devi is uniquely poignant, and the account of Alauddin Khilji's daughter and her fondness for the idol of Sri

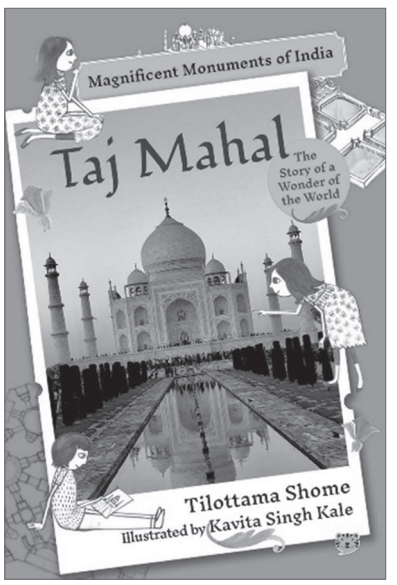
Ranganatha is a riveting story! Along with these, there are plenty of tales about brave queens who fought battles to protect their empires, especially from foreigners. There is a lot to learn from the bravery of Chowta dynasty's Rani Abakka against the Portuguese, the valour of Gondwana's Rani Durgavati against Akbar's Mughal army, and the courage of Tamil Nadu's Velu Nachiyar and Punjab's Rani Jindan against the British. Young girls will surely be inspired by the stories of these lion-hearted women, who fought their own battles and made their own choices, both in the war-zone and if needed, in their homes too.

The author begins each chapter and each new story with a short introduction giving a background of the kingdom and the importance of the same. These short paragraph or two are excellent guiding elements for the readers. The author has incorporated historical facts and events like Tamil Sangamas which lot of people remain unaware about.

Royal history is not just about battles and invasions. History is as much about art and architecture, literature and music, dance and poetry, faith and food. The author has illustrated these aspects in great detail and in the simplest manner possible. There are chapters about the unique pets of Mughal rulers Akbar and Jahangir and the origin of kebabs and biryani with the help of Lucknow's Nawab! The descriptions would make a young, curious mind happy and satisfied. The accompanying illustrations and the interwoven storytelling prompts the reader to continue to the next story. This book has the ability to turn even the most history-averse child into a history enthusiast.

Andal Jagannathan

TAJ MAHAL: THE STORY OF A WONDER OF THE WORLD
By Tilottama Shome. Illustrations: Kavita Singh Kale
Talking Cub, Speaking Tiger Books, 2022, pp. 118, ₹ 499.00


Magnificent Monuments of India
Taj Mahal
The Story of a Wonder of the World
Tilottama Shome
Illustrated by Kavita Singh Kale

Open the book and you 'see' Shah Jahan, imprisoned by his son Aurangzeb, gazing at the Taj Mahal from his prison. Reading on, and with the help of Kavita Singh Kale's illustrations, you get pulled into the captive emperor's thoughts and get a peep into his cherished memories. Those of the happy days spent with his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal. And of the sad days too, when Mumtaz died after giving birth to their fourteenth child. Mumtaz's death pushed Shah Jahan into deep mourning for a very long time. It was during this period that he envisioned the Taj Mahal—a grand mausoleum (*maqbara*) at the bend of a mighty river. Agra, with the glorious Yamuna flowing through, was chosen as the site for Mumtaz Mahal's *maqbara*.

Today the Taj Mahal is known as a symbol of love, but it is a lot more than that. It is also a symbol of the might of the Mughal empire at that time.

The author delves into the history of Agra and shares interesting facts such as archeological evidence that says Agra existed in 1800 BCE, and that Alexander's General Ptolemy, during 323-283 BCE, was the first person to put the name Agra on a map. She shares a lot of historical facts and incidents that cover the Mughals' entry into India. According to historical records, Babar, the first Mughal emperor in India, made Agra one of the most prosperous cities of the world. To get respite from the city's heat and dust he got geometric gardens, with shade giving trees, built.

The author shares interesting tidbits of information. One such piece of information is that Humayun, while leaving Persia after living there in exile, hosted a Hindustani banquet for his Persian hosts. In that banquet his hosts were introduced to ghee and turmeric. They loved the dishes and ghee and turmeric have stayed as part of their cuisine since then.

The author describes the building of Humayun's tomb in Delhi. Constructed with the help of Persian craftsmen, Humayun's tomb depicted Paradise where the virtuous went after death. We also read about Jahangir and his love for art and architecture. Interestingly, Jahangir who was very fond of jewellery and fashionable clothing, started a trend of decorating turbans with miniature paintings. There are descriptions about Noor Jahan's successful business ventures and the buildings constructed under her supervision. The tomb that she got built for her parents was the first tomb to be made in white marble. For Mughal architecture, it was a stepping stone to the Taj Mahal.

The author talks at length about Shah Jahan's and his siblings' lives. After her death, Mumtaz Mahal was buried in Burhanpur in Madhya Pradesh. Her remains were later exhumed and shifted to Agra.

The author, an architect by training, explains the different types of gardens found in Mughal architecture. Illustrations and photographs supporting the descriptions lend clarity. A four-part garden called the Charbagh became very popular. There were variants in the Charbagh layout—Humayun's tomb in Delhi has the cross-axial layout, Shalimar Bagh in Kashmir has terrace gardens and Lal Mahal in Bari has waterfront gardens. The first Charbagh was built in Agra.

The author explains several other facets of the Taj Mahal's architecture such as the double vaulted dome. The inner layer of the dome functions as the ceiling for the interior, and the outer layer is raised to give a grand appearance. The author takes readers for a 'walk' around the Taj Mahal, sharing interesting snippets from history and pointing out the original layout of the Taj Mahal. She takes her readers into the complex, and into the enclosures within the forecourt. She pauses to point out where to stop and look at the intricate inlay work or take in the first view of the Taj Mahal. She describes how inlay work is done and talks about the difference between inlay and relief work.

We learn from the book that the Taj Mahal was built based on a plan called the *Hasht Bihisht,* a Persian term that means Eight Paradises. The Taj Mahal is a perfect example of this plan. The bird's eye view of the Taj Mahal has eight sides.

The author tells us that the current complex is possibly just half of Shah Jahan's original grand complex. There are no formal records of the craftsmen who built Taj Mahal. Some records say that 20,000 men worked on the tomb for 20 years! The official recorded date of completion is 1643. Shah Jahan died in 1666 and was buried in the Taj Mahal in a tomb beside the tomb of his beloved Mumtaz Mahal.

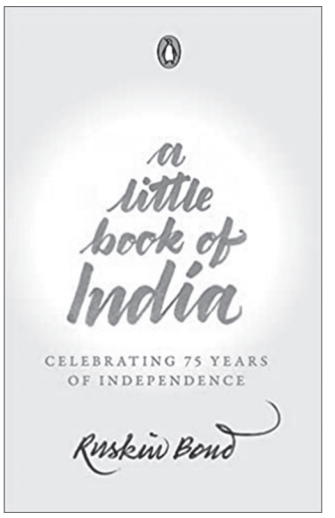
The author says that it is believed that Shah Jahan had plans to construct a tomb for himself in black marble on the opposite side of the river, facing the Taj Mahal. The Yamuna flanked by a black and a white Taj Mahal! That, sadly, did not come to pass. How majestic

the sight would have been had Shah Jahan succeeded!

The Taj Mahal, the Story of a Wonder of the World, is bound to delight young readers and plant in them curiosity about other heritage buildings and a spirit of appreciation of historical monuments.

Nilima Sinha

A LITTLE BOOK OF INDIA: CELEBRATING 75 YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE
By Ruskin Bond. Cover illustration: Tarun Deep Girdher
Penguin/Viking, 2022, pp. 104, ₹ 299.00



A little book that says it all—from beautiful descriptions of Nature's bounty, and the history of an ancient nation and its civilization—to memories, old and precious. It is only the talented Ruskin Bond who can do it.

There are no long descriptions, no pages filled with print, yet the little book succeeds in presenting our country in all its beautiful, wonderful, and glorious colours. Its rivers, mountains, plants, fruit, its culture, and history are all described in minimum words, yet bring back vivid pictures of both the past and the present.

As someone who has lived through those historical times and has witnessed the coming of Independence 75 years ago, I well appreciate the author's retelling of those days. Having lived both in Shimla before Partition, going to school in the company of British kids, and then, with my father getting posted in Delhi, being fortunate enough to have witnessed the coming of Independence, followed by the flooding of the capital with desperate refugees trying to settle down in a new country, and the sudden, shocking death of Gandihiji—I have been witness to all that took place at the time and Bond's descriptions succeeded in bringing back a flood of precious memories.

The history of India after Independence is related, in short, concise form, until we come to the present. Bond teaches us to be proud of the colours, the sounds, the culture, the tombs, and monuments, of our beautiful country.

The author's reminder, at the end, that there are still many freedoms that we need to strive towards—such as freedom from poverty, want, greed, envy, hate and fear, is a timely message of all that we, as a nation, still need to achieve.

The simple book cover by Tarun Deep Girdhar succeeds in catching the attention of the reader.

This 'little' book is one which all children in India must read, so that they learn to appreciate our past and try to build a better future to make it an even more glorious nation.

Therefore, I conclude with Ruskin Bond's wonderful message: 'The present is never our end. The past and present are means to an end. And striving for a better, greater future is our destiny.'

Aisha Kawalkar, Manjusha VGVS, Sachin Saxena, Himanshu Shrivastav

PASSION WITH ADITI PANT
By Pervin Saket. Illustrations: Boski Jain

COURAGE WITH ANANDIBAI JOSHEE
By Pervin Saket. Illustrations: Sriya Singh

COMMITMENT WITH BIBHA CHOWDHURI
By Pervin Saket. Illustrations: Sahitya Rani

PERSEVERANCE WITH JANAKI AMMAL
By Pervin Saket. Illustrations: Sahitya Rani

All four published by AdiDev Press, Women in Science Series, 2022, pp. 20 each, Set Price ₹ 1500.00

What picture comes to your mind when you think of a scientist? Well, when children are presented with this question and asked to draw a scientist at work, more often than not, they draw an elderly or middle-aged man wearing a lab coat and spectacles, mixing chemicals in fancy glassware. Alarmingly, the proportion of children who hold such a stereotypical mental image of a scientist seems quite large: 86.5% in a study done in 1998[1] and 78% in a more recent study[2]! This narrow perception of scientists as male and science as a male-dominated endeavour limited to a particular kind of lab probably stems from a skewed representation of mostly white male scientists in school textbooks and other media. Its downside is clear that children from diverse backgrounds are then unable to imagine a future for themselves in science as they don't see people similar to themselves doing science.

So, as a team of science educators working with students from marginalized contexts for whom it is all the more difficult to find relatable role models in science, we got excited with the idea of a set of children's books that could potentially expand and enrich the understanding of what scientists look like and do. That's the vantage point from which we engage with this set of books on 'Women in science'. The four board books in this box-set are written in short, playful verse by Pervin Saket and wonderfully illustrated by four different artists. Together, the verses and the pictures narrate the stories of four trailblazing Indian women: Bibha Chowdhuri, Anandibai Joshee, Janaki Ammal and Aditi Pant who were pioneers in diverse fields of science from physics to medicine, botany and oceanography. As part of a larger series called 'Learning to be', these stories attempt to inspire little readers with big values of commitment, courage, perseverance and passion.

Commitment with Bibha Chowdhuri is the story of the first Indian woman in high-energy physics. As a particle physicist, she studied cosmic rays and contributed substantially to discovering mesons using photographic plates. She was also the first woman scientist at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, a premier institute in the country. She was an eminent scholar who dedicated her life to scientific pursuits and served many prestigious scientific institutions during her lifetime. However, despite her significant contributions, she did not

1. Chunawala, S & Ladage, S. (1998). Students' Ideas about Science and Scientists *(Technical Report No. 38)*. Homi Bhabha Centre for Science Education, Tata Institute of Fundamental Research.

2. Nath, S., & Thomas, S. (2013). Students' Image about a Scientist at Work: A Phenomenographic Study of Drawings. *International Journal of Educational Science and Research (IJESR), 3*(1), 41-54.

receive due recognition and appraisals for her work in her lifetime. Like many women researchers, she too remained an unsung hero to the scientific community until the book *A Jewel Unearthed: Bibha Chowdhuri, The Story of an Indian Woman Scientist* was published in 2018. It was only 28 years after her demise that she was honoured by the International Astronomical Union, and a star was named after her on 17th December 2019.

Bibha's story with the message, 'Stay committed till it's done,' is undoubtedly a huge inspiration for young readers. Sahitya Rani has done a wonderful job with illustrations. Pervin's play with words is also commendable though one is curious to know how young readers would respond to the content. The editors could have done a better job with language editing. The selection of words to convey the message is a little problematic as the readers of the target age group have limited vocabulary. At times, the treatment of the story comes across as superficial. Some details of her personal and professional struggle and how she overcame those challenges would have further enriched the story.

Next in the series, *Courage with Anandibai Joshee*, is the story of the first Indian woman who studied western medicine in the 1880s. The author has attempted to showcase a few major events of Anandibai's life in her poetic style. As one flips through the first few pages, one learns that Anandibai lost her newborn within a few days due to lack of medical facilities. The incident got her concerned about women's health. She was courageous and determined to address challenges in women's healthcare in India. For that, she wanted to go abroad and study western medicine. But the idea of staying alone in a foreign country was not acceptable to her community. She had to overcome various sociocultural barriers before she moved to the United States of America at the age of 19. After returning to India, she was offered the position of physician-in-charge of the female ward at the Albert Edward Hospital. However, her health deteriorated by that time, and she could not contribute the way she would have hoped to. She died at the young age of 22. Even though she did not get to practice for more than two to three months, she comes across as an inspirational figure who took the challenge of learning a male-dominated discipline and successfully handled social and cultural pressures on her way. The illustrator, Sriya Singh, has done a fascinating job of illustrating Anandibai's life. The text and illustrations are compatible, and the content of the storybook seems appropriate for the target age group.

The third book in this set, *Perseverance with Janaki Ammal*, gives a glimpse of the amazing journey of India's first woman botanist who went on to receive the Padma Shri award for her achievement that helped many farmers increase their yields. In an era when it was difficult for most women to make it past high school, Ammal made it possible to overcome the hurdles and bag a PhD at one of America's best universities. She made groundbreaking contributions to her field, improving local varieties of sugarcane and brinjal while also throwing light on the processes of evolution of many species. Impressed by her work, the Royal Horticultural Society invited her to work with them in England and later on, to honour her work, they named a magnolia variety after her. Her journey, though, wasn't smooth. Back home, in India, she faced discrimination based on her caste and single woman status. Ammal's perseverance helped her to push through these challenges and achieve her dreams. The journey of Janaki Ammal motivates young readers to pursue higher studies, overcome biases and barriers, and stand for their aspirations. Unfortunately, the cursory mention of the problems women scientists face doesn't give a clear sense of their struggles.

In an attempt to depict Ammal's dedication to her research, she is shown as continuing to work unfazed at the peak of World War II. However, this depiction of scientists might reinforce a stereotype that they are usually detached from all that happens around them, which is often not the case. Scientists are very much part of the world they live in; they get affected by social, cultural and political processes around them, and through their work, they also contribute to those processes. A nuanced understanding of how science works and what scientists do would have further enriched the story.

Passion with Aditi Pant is about discovering what sparks you and following it with fervour wherever it takes you. This book narrates Aditi Pant's journey of becoming and being an acclaimed oceanographer. Young Aditi had an environment at home that fostered curiosity through dinner-table conversations about how things worked. She, admittedly, learnt what it takes to get consistent results, be it cooking or other experiments, from her mother, who was herself a medical doctor (though this is not mentioned in the book, which only focuses on her cooking). Her father, a diplomat by profession, shared his love for reading and trekking with her. No wonder Aditi wanted a career that combined this passion for academics and adventure, that allowed freedom of movement and took her to places. A book gifted to her, *The Open Sea* opened up a whole new world for her, and she found her calling to study tiny, microscopic creatures called plankton that have a big role in the ocean ecosystem.

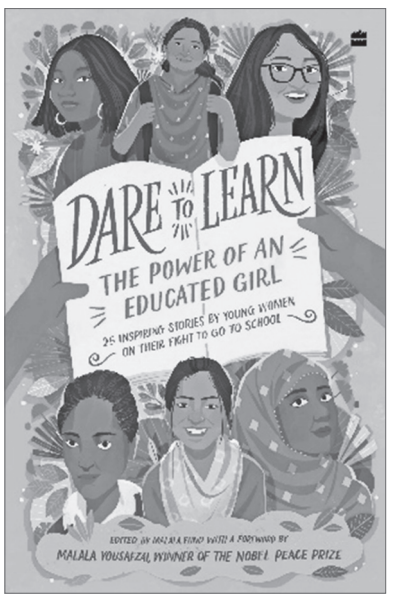
Aditi's family couldn't afford higher studies abroad, but she bagged a scholarship that enabled her to do so. With a PhD from Hawaii, she returned to India to work at the National Institute for Oceanography, knowing well that she would be paid less than abroad. But then she could contribute to nation-building and be where she felt she belonged. As a lone female member of the team that travelled along the West Coast of India and stayed on beaches, Aditi was not wary about the food, water or privacy but found solidarity and support from the fisherwomen who tried to ensure that she was safe and comfortable. The high point in her career came when Aditi became the first Indian woman, along with Sudipta Sengupta, to set foot on the icy terrains of faraway Antarctica. She contributed to building the first Indian research station in Antarctica. Both the women on this team, with experience in mountaineering, were much better at working in the harsh climate of Antarctica than many of their male counterparts who had worked only in labs. Thus, Aditi's story breaks many stereotypes of what women can do and encourages young readers to follow their passion. However, conversely, this is

also a story about how young girls could be supported to achieve big things and what role people's backgrounds play in scaffolding their attempts. Boski Jain's illustrations prove that pictures speak more than words. Right from the cover page, her pictures are captivating and fill in many of the gaps that the verses leave out. We especially loved how she has brought the book *The Open Sea* to life.

Talking of this series, we would like to point out that the publisher's choice of developing these as board books is questionable as such a quality of production comes at the cost of limiting the reach of the books from millions of readers from small towns and villages. The whole purpose of these books appears defeated. We wish that the publisher would make a note of it and try to make these books affordable to common people. There seems to be a mismatch between the targeted age group of 4 to 8-year-olds (who cannot even flip pages easily due to their young age and hence need board books) and the level of the language used. Also, if such a young age group is assumed, would children of this age be able to grasp the essence of these narratives? Perhaps, a more fleshed out and nuanced rendition of life histories addressed to a higher age group of children would do better justice to the stories of these legends, their struggles and achievements. Nevertheless, we admire the effort that has gone into bringing out such fascinating narratives that remain largely untold, especially in children's literature and encourage parents and educators to have a look themselves.

Mudit Shrivastav

DARE TO LEARN: THE POWER OF AN EDUCATED GIRL
By Malala Fund
HarperCollins, 2022, pp. 204 , ₹ 299.00


DARE TO LEARN
THE POWER OF AN EDUCATED GIRL
25 INSPIRING STORIES BY YOUNG WOMEN ON THEIR FIGHT TO GO TO SCHOOL
EDITED BY MALALA FUND WITH A FOREWORD BY
MALALA YOUSAFZAI, WINNER OF THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE

Whenever I imagine about war, images of the aftermath of war come to my mind. Everything is scattered around. I can see only those people and things that have somehow escaped from the bombings. I can see the ominous silence spread out after the heart-rending blasts. I can see the school which has nothing left now. I can see the children who had come to school with dreams in their eyes, with the belief that everything will be alright if they study. I can only imagine what those children may be going through when all they can choose between is going to school or saving their lives.

But this book by Malala Fund carries stories told by children who have gone through just this. By girls who were stopped from going to school, and when they got a chance to study, war and attacks took away that opportunity too.

The book is an important document that tries to tell the world that when in one corner of the world the skies were raining with bombs and missiles, some seeds in another corner of the world were trying their best to flower. There are 25 stories in this book – written by girls who first had to face taunts for being 'girls', and then curbed from studying. Some were married off at a very young age. Girls who struggled and somehow came out of this faced terrorist attacks and wars between countries that created more shackles. These are stories of girls who did not give up in the face of the kings of patriarchy. Who took on the responsibility of fighting the world. And they fought, not with arms, but with books!

While reading the book, you may feel in the beginning, that the stories of all the struggles will be the same. The girls would have faced similar challenges, but no. As you read on, you will find each story unfolding a new challenge. Every girl has her own problems to face. What binds all the stories together is the courage, spiritedness and perseverance of these girls to study and do something in life. In addition to India, the book includes stories from Iraq, Nigeria, Yuganda, Turkey, Pakistan, Venezuela, Morocco, U.K., Brazil, Canada and Ethiopia.

The stories have dreams. Nirbas Basitkey from Iraq (story no. 2) says, 'My favourite subject in school was maths. To most students, maths is a subject that they want to steer clear of. But to me, each mathematical problem served as an embodiment of a problem in my own life. If I could successfully solve for "x", why would I not be able to solve the problems of child marriage and girls' education in my own community?'

There are prayers in the stories. Ravdanur, living on the borders of Syria and Turkey writes, 'You grow up fast when every day is a fight to stay alive. My last eight months in Syria were spent almost entirely indoors. Our town was being bombed every day and so we had to hide for safety. I was always praying for peace, dreaming about peace. I could see that it was so needed.'

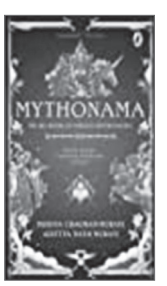
The book also carries photographs of these girls. Looking at them, you get a feel that you have known them since ages. After reading the stories, when you look at these photographs, on one hand you feel a lightness inside, and on the other, your belief increases in the fact that dreams can come true. You will find a glow on your face and wetness in your eyes.

These stories should reach far and wide—in villages, towns and cities. Especially those girls who are going through similar situations. And those boys too who have not had to face the challenges of 'being a girl'. The book is a must-read for young adults and teachers. It needs to be translated into many languages and taken to more and more readers.

These stories are not only of the girls, but also of their parents who gave them wings to fly. And of the teachers who stood by the girls in all adverse conditions. And also of the non-government organization that rose like a sun in these girls' lives…

Malala Fund and Harper Collins deserve a heartfelt 'thank you' for telling these stories with so much care.

Book News ***Book News***

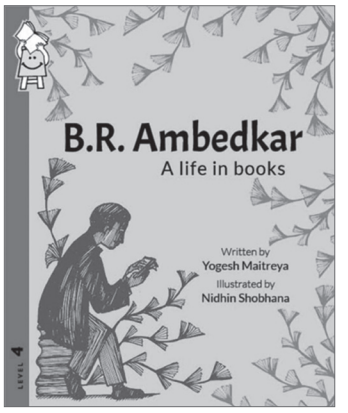


Mythonama: The Big Book of Indian Mythologies by Mudita Chauhan-Mubayi and Adittya Nath Mubayi is a Super Fun Guide and Activity Book on Indian Mythologies, which invites children to dive into myths and legends from the Avesta, Quran, Mahabharata, Bible and more. Meet immortal beings and magical creatures like Kag Bhushundi, Girimekhala and Bahubali in anecdotes, fables, quizzes and crosswords. Unlock this vault of timeless treasures, brimming with creation myths, supernatural twins, sacred plants and wondrous weapons.

Puffin, 2022, pp. 264, ₹ 350.00

Adnan Farooqui

B.R. AMBEDKAR: A LIFE IN BOOKS
By Yogesh Maitreya. Illustrations: Nidhin Shobhana
Pratham Books, 2021, pp. 16, ₹ 50.00



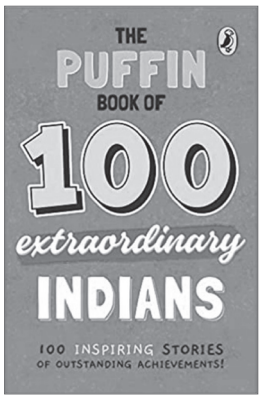
B.R. Ambedkar: A Life in Books, is a very imaginative and accessible introduction to one of the tallest leaders India has ever had. The book, without being pedantic, provides a young reader a bird's eye view of life and times of Babasaheb. It does a fabulous job of introducing young minds to difficult themes such as caste-based discrimination, equity and justice. The issue of discrimination and alienation, faced by students from groups lower down the caste continuum, is not brushed aside but dealt with quite sensitively. Young Ambedkar too faced discrimination in school, and his time in school was devoid of any lasting friendships. The author very elegantly positions the centrality of books, as he sought shelter in their company, in Babasaheb's evolution and transformation over the years. Books came to the rescue of young Ambedkar and he forged a life-long relationship with them. His new friends provided him an access to a whole new world. Books provided Ambedkar an avenue to a world devoid of discrimination, where one could not only dream the unthinkable, but also work towards the realization of the dream of an egalitarian and just society.

The sheer grit and determination with which Ambedkar devoured books and most significantly internalized all the wisdom they had to offer is ably demonstrated by the author. Books remained a constant companion as Ambedkar's quest for knowledge took him to the pinnacle of academic achievements. His single-minded pursuit of knowledge, and his awareness about the socio-economic predicament of his fellow caste members, made him determined to challenge the status quo. The solace provided by books in turn helped Ambedkar become sensitive, compassionate, and empathetic towards the less fortunate amongst his fellow caste members. This early initiation worked as a catalyst for the single-minded devotion with which Babasaheb fought for the upliftment of the socially-marginalized and stigmatized groups in Indian society.

The author has done a stellar job of introducing young readers to the arduous journey undertaken by Ambedkar all his life. Beautifully illustrated, the book helps paint a very vivid picture of the trials, tribulations, and triumph in the life of one of the tallest statesmen of the last century. The book not only underlines the importance of books, but most crucially the role they play in bringing out the best in us. It nudges the young reader to think of books not only as means to an end, but as an end in itself where the pursuit of knowledge remains an eternal quest, and the motive is not so much to reach the destination but to undertake the journey.

Vishesh Unni Raghunathan

THE PUFFIN BOOK OF 100 EXTRAORDINARY INDIANS
Puffin Books, 2022, pp. 343, ₹ 299.00



The Puffin Book of 100 Extraordinary Indians, 100 inspiring stories of outstanding achievements, is a compilation of stories of different Indians across diverse fields from various eras.

Arranged alphabetically, and seemingly written by different authors (no author has been credited), the book feels random. For example, one moment you are reading about the maverick football player, Baichung Bhutia, the next you are reading about the journalist Barkha Dutt, and then it is Bhagat Singh, the freedom fighter. The story of each person is encapsulated in about 700-800 words, summarizing the most significant moment of change in each person's life which led them to achieving what they did.

The compilation seems to have been written by multiple authors, as the stories are written in different styles. The narration style varies from first person, to second, and third person. Some of the stories are written in short crisp sentences, while others have longer sentences with complex vocabulary. For instance, words like catalyst, puritanical, obscenity etc., are words a 10 year old might not understand.

While the idea of bringing together a compilation of extraordinary Indians to inspire children is great, the execution could have been much better. The stories could have been arranged in the order of different fields, such as sports, business, film, music, etc. The writing could have been edited to ensure consistency in language and form. Categorizing the appropriate age group for children's books is always tricky, but to rate a book as 10 years old – (as claimed by the publishers) and above, riddled with higher vocabulary, and inconsistencies seems inappropriate.

The Puffin Book of 100 Extraordinary Indians might prove to be a useful library book which would introduce various achievers in different fields, but whether it can be a source of inspiration in itself is doubtful.

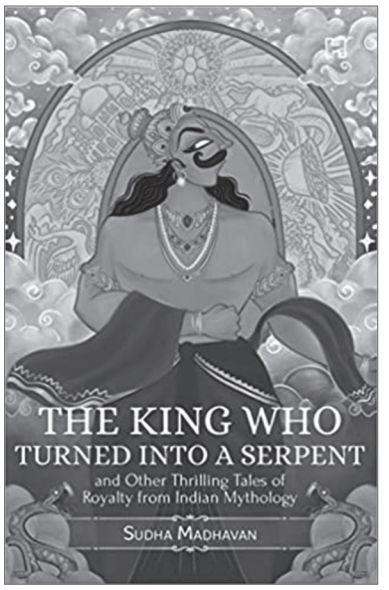
PRINCE ZAFAR'S VERY IMPORTANT NOTEBOOK
By Nandini Nayar. Illustrated by Suvidha Mistry
Children's Book Trust, 2022, pp. 16, ₹ 60.00

This short story (only 16 pages long) is humourous and enjoyable for ages 2-8 and would make anyone smile. I enjoyed the book and would recommend it to a person having a bad day. The simplicity of the book is lovely and would work well as a bedtime story with easy-to-read sentences and beautiful illustrations. It delivers an important life lesson that people do not need to follow a rigid system and should be open to try new things to see if they like them or not. My rating for the book varies according to age. For younger children, this book would be a 10/10, but for children 6-8, it may be slightly childish. Nevertheless, I would like to come across more books like this to let my inner child out every once in a while.

Serena Shah

Simran Sadh

THE KING WHO TURNED INTO A SERPENT AND OTHER THRILLING TALES OF ROYALTY FROM INDIAN MYTHOLOGY
By Sudha Madhavan
Hachette India, 2022, pp. 200, ₹ 399.00



A collection of stories with a mythological backdrop to it has the potential to attract readers from diverse age groups, especially those who have had a taste of such stories in their childhood. The stories are written in an interactive manner and the connectedness between each of them takes the reader back and forth, weaving into a universe of the epic Mahabharata and sometimes drawing from the Ramayana as well. However, some of the stories are also much more than that and stand independently, such as the story of 'Por Kai Pandian, The King with a Golden Hand'.

Targeting young readers, the stories of magnificent gods and kings are retold with interjections from the author. At the end of every story, an epilogue shares additional information about the story, extending the universe of the story and sometimes references reality, for example, the story of 'Queen Meenakshi of Madurai' which refers to the Meenakshi Amman Temple in Madurai. On the one hand this adds to the experience of reading the stories but on the other, it conveniently blurs the lines between mythology and reality. The liberal transversion to reality therefore needs to be looked at critically.

A question also arises about the purpose of retelling these stories which have already been out there in various forms for a very long time. How does this collection of stories contribute to the existing literature on mythological characters, more so in the current times when attempts are being made to bring in more aware and inclusive content to children's literature? Do the stories give a different and contemporary spin to the stories otherwise dominantly told from a patriarchal lens of upper caste Brahmins? Do they give the space to question the ways of the kings and the sages as well as women's space in the society at that time? The collection merely recreates the female characters as have been depicted in mythologies historically without sparing them any agency of their own.

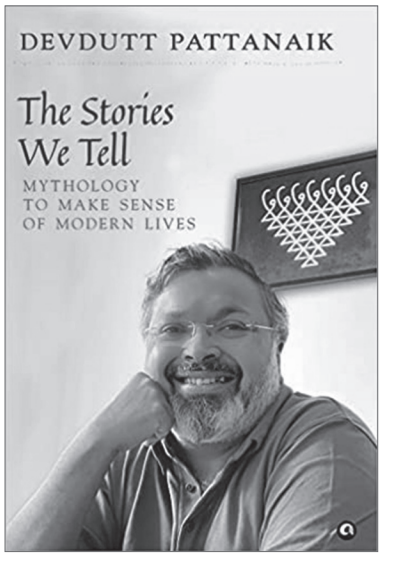
Despite the many possibilities of interjectory narration in the stories to provoke the reader to question the stereotyped portrayal, female characters in Sudha Madhavan's stories exist simply to introduce the male characters or enable the actions of the male characters so as to signify their magnificence. They are passed on as brides in political exchanges between kingdoms and the adjectives used for them throughout the collection remain limited whereas many diverse male characters exist in the stories. Out of the twenty stories in the collection, only two have princesses as their protagonists and only one has a queen as the central character. The portrayals of the female characters in these three stories revolve either around courtship or the physical appearances of these females, similar to the rest of the female characters in the collection.

Apart from a stereotyped portrayal of its female characters, it also continues to present disabilities as deformations due to curses which are cured by the end of the story, such as in the story of 'King Nala, The Great Horseman and Amazing Cook'. The author often ends up falling for biased and sanitized portrayals of the characters, for example, while universally the Mahabharata has been established as an epic whose characters lie on the wide spectrum of good and evil, the characters of Mahabharata in this collection are compartmentalized into categories of good or evil. The plots in many stories are centred around the binaries of gods, kings, and demons who have predictable characteristics. The actions of gods towards demons are justified for the sake of maintaining order in society and for the greater good of all; for example in the story 'Kumbhakarna, the Sleepyhead Prince', Brahma tricked Kumbhakarna to ask for sleep instead of the destruction of gods as a boon. Demons are the disfigured ones and have to do penance or die at the hand of a god to become whole again as happens in the story of 'How Prince Rama Saved Kabandha, the Demon…By Killing Him'. The collection appeals to the nostalgia of listening to stories of magic and mythical creatures but is dominated by Hindu mythologies instead of Indian. The potential of a story to engage a reader falls short when one encounters inconsistency in the plot as well as continuity errors which occur throughout the collection.

Lastly, in 2022, are we just looking for a forgettable enjoyable read or critical thought-provoking literature?

Andal Jagannathan

THE STORIES WE TELL: MYTHOLOGY TO MAKE SENSE OF MODERN LIVES
By Devdutt Pattanaik
Aleph Book Company, 2022, pp.199, ₹ 499.00



Renowned mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik has picked seventy-two tales, mainly from India's rich mythology, and used them as a canvas to paint 21st century on. This collection of stories originates from Patnaik's webcast called *Teatime Tales*. Why did he pick 72 stories? Well, the reason lies in mythology. 72 steps, 72 hours, 72 names, 72 stupas—all these and more feature in mythology. Do read the 72nd story in the book to know the significance of the number 72 in mythology from various religions.

'Myth is how people imagine the world,' says the author in the introduction. And then he takes you on a whirlwind tour of the world through the lens of mythology. Not just the usual Indian suspects—the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Jataka and Jain tales and the *Puranas*—there's a dive into Arabic, Greek, Roman, Egyptian and Norse myths too.

Th author has opted to bucket stories as per various themes. One such theme is 'Apsara'—a quick run-through of multiple interesting stories with women (*apsaras*) as protagonists. There is Tilottama, who without lifting a weapon, causes the death of two *asuras*; there's Urvashi who returns to heaven, leaving husband and children behind, because she was bored, and a few more *apsaras*' interesting stories. Surpanakha, a *rakshasi*, has a whole chapter, with 2-3 versions of her

story, dedicated to her.

Are you fond of puzzles? If so, you will find Tale 7 interesting. It is about a king called Vikramaditya from the post-Gupta, pre-Rajput era. The author shares a few Vikram-Vetal (ghost) parables, with each parable containing a puzzle.

Tale 10 talks about the Jain Mahabharata. Now, not many of us know that such a version even exists! The 21st tale is about justice. It has a bunch of stories related to justice and it talks about the importance of measurement being inherent in justice. There is a lot of food for thought here.

It is not easy to draw parallels between two different religions. However, Tale 24 is titled Easter and Holi and talks of both festivals being connected to rebirth and regeneration.

Join the author in drawing even more parallels in Tale 45 which is titled 'Star Wars and the Ramayana'. This chapter also has references to the Odyssey, the Iliad, some Finnish folklore, the *Lord of the Rings* and some Japanese and German folklore as well. Interesting thought flow!

Tale 55 is a sweet little story about the Sun god and his wife. Strong relationship advice comes through at the end of the story!

Was the Buddha bald or did he have a topknot? Why do the Shankaracharyas keep their head covered? Hair and the lack of it are discussed in Tale 57.

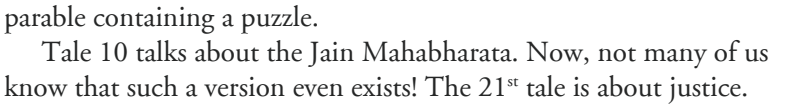
Tale 59 is dedicated to numbers. There is a list of popular numbers used in Hindu mythology and references to the instances of their use.

With you, all through the book, starting from the cover, is a tantric Saraswati symbol. It is a pattern that starts with one seed and heads towards infinity. The author likens the symbol to the life cycle of a story. He intends each story to be a seed that will sprout infinite ideas. Oh, and the symbol works the other way too—from infinite to the finite. Perspective makes all the difference. It will make a difference in how you interpret the author's tales too.

And, the author is fine if you prefer not to learn from the stories. His endnote is open acceptance of the fact that not everyone will receive his stories as he intends them to.

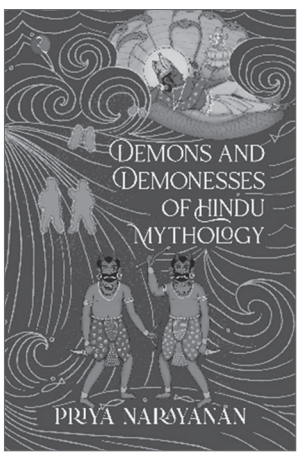
They whom truth and wisdom lead, can gather honey from a weed.
– William Cowper

So, will you learn from the stories?



Ruchi S

DEMONS AND DEMONESSES OF HINDU MYTHOLOGY
By Priya Narayanan
Rupa, 2021, pp. 130, ₹ 295.00



This book is a collection of stories of 17 mythical beings—Asuras, Rakshasas/Rakshasis from Hindu mythology, centered around whom stories are rarely written or discussed.

In Hindu mythology, devas or gods are often shown to be virtuous (even their cunningness portrayed as diplomacy and ingenuity) and thus victorious; always celebrated and glorified. Asuras and Rakshasa/rakshasis on the other hand are shown as evil, demonic figures, whose defeat at the hands of devas are symbolized as victory of good over evil.

In this background arrives this collection that narrates 'their' stories, that treats them as 'central characters'. As the author shares in an interview with *Frontlist*, one of her readers wrote back to her saying that she had heard of these demons but did not know their origin stories and it was this 'not knowing' that was a key reason why she thought of writing the book.

Questions that this quest of hers revolve around are: Where did these demons come from? Where did they live? What are the differences between Asuras and Rakshasas? How did the meaning of the word 'Asura' change over a period of time? How do the concepts of time and space apply to the world of demons? She was persistent and critical enough for not taking the childhood stories at their face value; she raised questions, put in efforts to find answers and that inspired the book. Going beyond the generalized notion that 'all asuras and rakshasas are evil', she does try bringing in those like *Trijata*, who pose a strong counter-example.

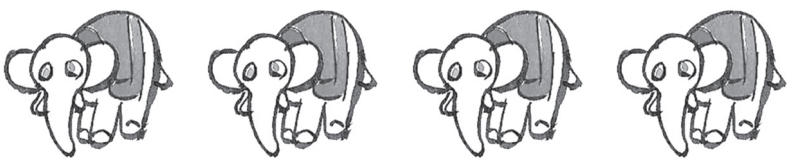
While I appreciate the efforts and process of engaging with literature (translations of ancient texts, commentarial essays and more), to collate and bring out retold versions of mythical narratives, I must admit that I had a difficult time connecting with the quest, the book and the intent itself.

Perhaps, if I had stumbled upon this book some 6-7 years back while pursuing graduation in Sanskrit literature, I might have had a different response to it. Not a day would go by without of the nine of us in the classroom, coming up with a burning question or a comment on the *Vedic*, *Puranic*, classical or philosophical texts we were studying. The years that followed and some incidental encounters with the subaltern, critical discourse broadened my view further, stirring up curiosity to inquire into the then prevalent sociological and political reality reflected in these mythical accounts, at times in subtle, symbolized ways or at times expressed outright.

Expressions and narratives, whether creative or realistic, whether free-flowing or analytical, are never objective. Nor is one's perception of reality. Forming biases, judgements and rigidities, fear of the unknown and reservation against what is different from us, is instinctive. Time-wise, there are no exceptions to it. The myths too are susceptible to this. Examining closely, one may realize that it is not a mere battle between virtue and wickedness; the myths may potentially carry in them racial and caste biases, stereotypes, unverified fears, reflected in the view point from which a myth is told, from the portrayal of characters.

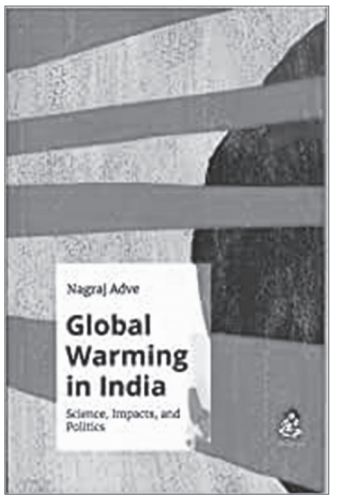
Current discourse underscores that Rakshsas or Asuras are not mere fictitious characters or mythological concepts. 'Who' were called Rakshas or a Danav or an Asur is a question that touches upon the racial and political dynamic. What also needs to be inquired into is, who were 'mythicized' as the demonic creatures? Unfortunately, the book fails to take into consideration this entire perspective, and operates within a limited conventional framework, treating the mythological world as an unquestioned, fictitious world in isolation to the socio-politico-cultural scenario of the times they were created/evolved in.

The times now demand a much deeper, much more careful, comprehensive and analytical approach; especially when it comes to religion, traditions, culture; and mythologies are indeed crucial components. Is it then responsible of us to turn a blind eye to something that is such a fundamental part of the reality?



Sarthak

GLOBAL WARMING IN INDIA: SCIENCE, IMPACTS, AND POLITICS
By Nagraj Adve
Eklavya, 2022, pp. 76, ₹ 80.00



Nagaraj Adve's *Global Warming in India* is a brief and practical guide that enables the reader to engage with the discussions, debates and actions about the most pressing social and moral issue before our generation. It is written with a sense of hope and compassion for the 'ordinary people' that is largely missing in similar and popular books, which tend to focus more on the specialist and technocratic solutions handed over from above and to which most of us are expected to assent to and participate merely as a consumer or observer. The first chapter about the science of global warming is presented without unnecessary jargon and covers all the concepts required to clearly grasp the phenomenon. But where this book differs the most from other popular climate change books is in Chapter 2 where the author identifies the 'systemic drivers' of the crisis.

The root cause of climate change is capitalism's DNA, argues Adve. A society which organizes its most important tasks and goals around the maximization of profits cannot address the needs of the ecosystems or its poor and working people. It produces more and more goods by degrading quality of work and the environment through cost cuttings in pollution prevention and casualizing jobs. Let's recount two (out of many) recent incidents that support this claim. One day after Putin invaded Ukraine the LNG Allies–an oil and gas lobbying association—wrote an open letter to Joe Biden asking him to expand the fossil fuel infrastructure to fill the export gap in Europe created by the war and also by the sanctions against Russia.[1]

And as a result, new gas and oil pipelines have been sanctioned along with $300 million in funding by the US government for the new fossil fuel infrastructure.[2] And in India, the *Economic Times* reported that, 'Russia's invasion of Ukraine has opened arbitrage opportunities so enticing that Reliance Industries Ltd deferred maintenance work at the world's biggest oil refining complex to churn out more diesel and naphtha after prices surged.'[3]

It is often claimed that it is taking us so much time to switch from fossil fuels to greener sources of energy because of all the inertia built in from previous decades of planning. But as these cases illustrate the cause of delay is not only past inertia but active investment and development for *more* fossil fuel dependence in the present and for the future.

Also, related to this is the Indian government's policy positions on climate change. The Indian NDC's – Nationally Determined Contributions for the Paris Agreement almost entirely depend on reducing the share of fossil fuel in the energy mix. Adve addresses the deficiency of such approach in the later chapters. He points out that for actual and meaningful reduction of greenhouse gas emissions the fossil fuels must drop in absolute terms. But this demand is rejected by the Indian government and also by much of the liberal and Left critics and environmentalists. They object that why should India, a 'developing' nation give up on its opportunity 'to grow' for mitigating a crisis created by the richer nations? One answer is being provided by the leaders of the most vulnerable island nations. They have been repeatedly saying that India and China are among the top emitters and emerging economies and 'while they (India and China) develop; we die; and why should we accept this?'[4] The self-image of India created by Indian intellectuals is very self-serving, shifting from a 'powerful' nation to 'developing poor' nation as the needs of the business and political elites demand. India is the third biggest emitter of greenhouse gases and when it claims its right to more 'carbon space' to develop at the cost of islands and coastal communities, then, how different is the notion of 'carbon space' from Nazi 'living space'?

Moreover, as Adve distinctly points out, the policies that lead to climate crisis have also led to unparalleled inequality both globally and in India. The NCRB 2021 Report reveals that in 2021, 1,64,033 people committed suicide in India, including 5 daily wage earners every hour;[5] while, 'during the pandemic (since March 2020, through to November 30th, 2021) the wealth of billionaires increased from INR 23.14 lakh crore (USD 313 billion) to INR 53.16 lakh crore (USD 719 billion). More than 4.6 crore Indians meanwhile are estimated to have fallen into extreme poverty in 2020 (nearly half of the global new poor according to the United Nations.) The stark wealth inequality in India is a result of an economic system rigged in favour of the super-rich over the poor and marginalised.'[6] So how justified can a business as usual 'let-India-develop' position be when the only development seems to be of the top 1% and top 10% of Indians.

The final chapter on solutions is filled with thought-provoking ideas that are just the right balance of specific and general to help come up with concrete plans while allowing creativity and local needs to be assimilated. But the solutions have to acknowledge and recognize the faces and the forces responsible for the economic and climate crisis: the billionaires and their corporations.

With an attractive 'red alert' cover, this book is an essential reading for anyone who wants to make sense of the changes taking place before us and to be a positive part of it.

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[3]'Billionaire Mukesh Ambani's refinery makes millions from war windfall' *Economic Times,* May 09 2022
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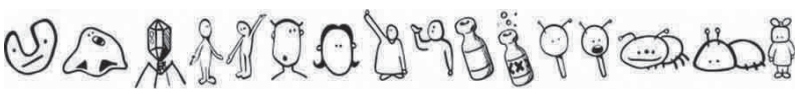


Shailaja Srinivasan

A WILDLIFE ADVENTURE: TIPU, SULTAN OF THE SIWALIKS
By Amirtharaj Christy Williams
Talking Cub, Speaking Tiger Books, 2022, pp. 190, ₹ 599.00

Picking up the book—the name made me wonder how an elephant in Rajaji National Park, far removed from the southern kingdom of Mysore got the name Tipu, fondly called

Sultan of the Siwaliks. Amirtharaj Christy Williams' memoir has the answer, and more! Elephant naming anecdotes abound.

An insightful Foreword by Prerna Singh Bindra, India's leading environmental journalist, tells how Williams makes a case for the Asian elephants, remarkable animals fighting a losing battle as forests get rapidly cleared for human use. African Elephants have long been studied and filmed and humanized by their chroniclers—scientists and conservationists, enjoy tremendous support unlike their Asian cousins. She also points out the fallacy in consigning all elephants into a single gray lump as each is an individual with distinct personality, idiosyncrasies and quirks.

The author opens the narrative with a vivid recalling of receiving an email from Aung Myo Chit, head of the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute in Myanmar, with the subject 'Delta Poaching' and horrifying pictures of dead elephants—skinned. The author's guilt of having used the rare opportunity of a window into the hidden lives of elephants to only publish scientific papers, and not having told the larger world about the elephants of Rajaji National Park resulted in the current title. The email brought home the urgency of educating society at large how endangered the Asian elephants were, as nearly 30 percent of the Asian elephants are in captivity and it is very difficult to fathom their plight in the wild. *Tipu: Sultan of the Siwaliks* is Willams' debt repaid with interest.

The memoir is a detailed passionate account of the author's early years as a student. Williams' life during those years revolved round the elephants in Rajaji National Park in Uttarakhand. His research plan was to collar four solitary males and four females and track them to answer important questions about their ecology. He recalls in great detail his involvement in conservation studies and challenges faced in collaring and tracking the eight elephants in his field area. This is a warm, funny and a deeply personal account of Willams's life intertwined with the elephants he was studying. He learned their language of rumbles, trumpets, squeaks and grunts and their gestures—a sway of a trunk, a swish of a tail, a flap of the ears and rubbing of heads.

Crop raiding beasts was an area of human-animal conflict and had to be handled sensitively. Villagers' agitation and complaints of a *'bahut bada hathi'* raidng their crops with impunity meant something had to be done! So, even though this tall pachyderm's favourite crop raiding area was logistically difficult to manage–he was chosen to be one of the males for collaring and tracking, to pacify the villagers. While the descriptions of his antics amused the author, the boldness with which he raided the crops and stubborness in refusing to let humans push him out of his rightful turf made Williams admire him and name him 'Tipu' after the legendary fearless ruler of Mysore who refused to bow before the British ruling India at the time.

The detailed description of the collaring expedition is a ring-side seat for the whole exercise though from the safety and comfort of your home!

This elephant centric narrative engagingly documents incidents witnessed from the lives of the radio collared elephants and all the humans involved in the study.

The chapters 'Close Shaves', 'The Rescue', 'Spotting Spots', 'Saving Kiruba', 'Births and Rains', 'Elephant Courage' tell the story of large heartedness of these gentle giants, of their lives and struggles. This book is not only full of information on elephant behaviour, but having been written some twenty plus years after the first-hand experiences, has great perspective. The accompanying pictures bring out Williams' talent as a wildlife photographer.

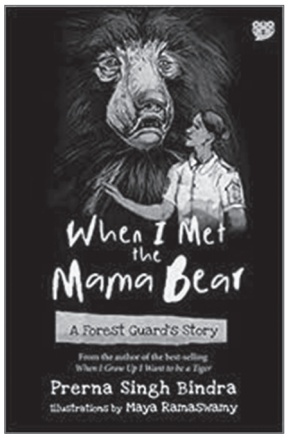
The end was logical and satisfying for me with the author having been able to say his last goodbye to Tipu, as the Sultan's reign was finally coming to an end. However, I can see the persuasion for the author to include 'Reflections of a Life Well Lived (A letter from Tipu)' as a first person narrative which is very powerful. This is Williams' ultimate tribute to Tipu in giving him the final word.

A MUST READ for all wildlife enthusiasts, lay readers and young adults considering exciting career options in conservation.

Shivam

WHEN I MET THE MAMA BEAR

By Prerana Singh Bindra. Illustrations: Maya Ramaswamy
Talking Cub, Speaking Tiger Books, 2022, pp. 80, ₹ 250.00



Have you ever wondered why we feel scared or become very excited when we hear about forests? Being born and brought up in metropolitan cities like Delhi, most of my understanding about forests comes from school books and they have usually portrayed forests as dangerous places.

However, forest is the home of Priya. Prerna Singh Bindra fascinatingly allows us to enter into the forest and learn about various things about animals and their behaviour. There are times when people romanticize life in the forest because we have seen it either in books or in cinema. The book provides us with real living experiences of the forest and how life can be without any social life. The author writes, 'No TV. No traffic. No laughter of kids or the gossip of neighbours. Only the wind howled. Sometimes, bats would fly by and the hoot of an owl would rise above the silence. They seemed lonely. Like her (Priya).'

Priya, who is a forest guard, herself wonders how she can protect the forest and animals being a woman. The story tries to bring up the notion of women being weaker than men and that only men have the capabilities of protection and how this internalization impacts women. The author later explains how mama bears or various other animals protect their children from all danger. However, her imagination of protection is only focused on mothers and through this, she reproduces the roles and responsibilities associated with motherhood. How children would see this notion of motherhood and protection requires further study.

The story is about a mama bear whose two cubs were in danger and how Priya and her team saved them. Later, Priya started identifying herself with Mama Bear because they both were mothers and were concerned about their children.

When one completes the story, the book seems to be a bit confusing. Other than the main story, it carries sections like 'Darshana's Story', 'A Note from the Author', 'Should we Intervene to "Save' Wild Animals?", 'About Sloth Bears and Other Bears', 'India's Green Army' and 'About Melghat'. Darshana repeats in her words the story already communicated through the fictional version. Then the author provides further explanations about Darshana. I strongly believe that any good literature is self-sufficient to communicate itself. When we start providing explanations, we limit the layers of interpretation it can unfold. Moreover, information about Sloth and other bears is interesting but does not fit into the structure of the book. It seems that the book lacks focus and tries to

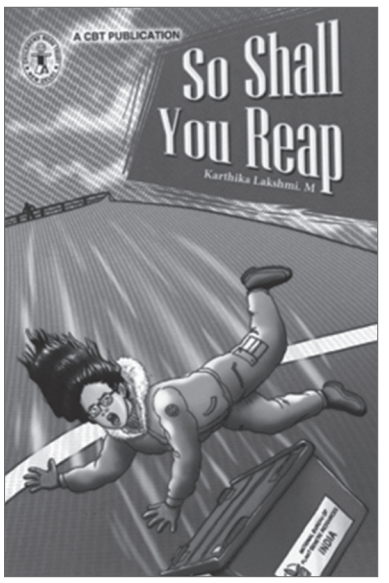
communicate too many things.

In the important 'Conservation' section the book talks about how forests are being destroyed due to human habitation expansion. It would have been more productive if the author had also indicated some key areas where the government can be urged to take action. Towards the end, the author takes us to the living condition of forest guards (Green Army) and also shares the statistics where between 2012-2017 India shared 31 per cent of total deaths of frontline forest staff worldwide.

The language of the narrative is comprehensible and would attract a wide audience. Use of sounds like OWWW, HUUUUFFFF etc., and occasional use of Hindi makes the text more interesting and difficult to leave in between! Maya Ramaswamy's illustrations seem to be careless even when they are good sketches. A sketch of the trunk has been repeated four times in the book whereas another sketch has also been displayed twice.

TCA Avni

SO SHALL YOU REAP
By Karthika Lakshmi M
Children's Book Trust, 2021, pp. 119, ₹ 80.00



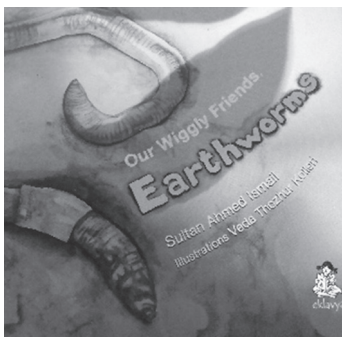
Karthika Lakshmi's *So Shall You Reap* was one of two prize winning entries in CBT's Realistic Fiction category in the 20th Competition for Writers of Children's Books organized in 2019. The story is about an expedition by students from across India to deposit seed samples in the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, with narrative conflict introduced through 'vested interests' who seek to replace the indigenous seed varieties with genetically modified ones. The relevance of the conflict is introduced through the crop failure of an experimental trial for Bt cotton, the stress of which is implied to have potentially caused the death of a protagonist's father.

The story then moves on to introducing readers to the other primary protagonists, 3 of the 72 students who were chosen for the expedition through an essay competition organized by the Government of India. Even without reading the other entries to CBT's competition, the reason for *So Shall You Reap*'s award is clearly understandable. The competition required stories to be 'bold and frank, complete with a strong story line and characters that are smart, brave or strong, and with scope for pondering and discussion'; the book quite successfully meets all these conditions. It is moreover very intensively researched, with the author weaving into the narrative descriptions and discussions of real-world events and issues. Thus, for example, the book talks about the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, the significance of its location and purpose, as well as real world incidents such as the retrieval of seeds from this 'Doomsday Vault' in the aftermath of the Syrian war. What is notable too is the effort the author makes to ensure balance at all times. Thus, even while the primary conflict is about the mala fide intent to switch Indian seeds with GMO ones, the author balances the criticism of GMOs themselves by including an aside on their success stories as well.

The book is an interesting read, and would particularly benefit from being introduced by teachers in classrooms. While it is a somewhat dry read, what makes the book useful for a classroom discussion is the range of issues it covers and the relatively complex concepts it introduces in an easy-to-understand manner. At the financially accessible price of Rs 80, the book would not be difficult to assign as mandatory reading, and can serve as a useful tool for engaging students with a wide range of concepts, especially for classroom exercises on the green revolution and the applications of biotechnology in economics and biology respectively.

Rajni Dwivedi

OUR WIGGLY FRIENDS EARTHWORMS
DILKASH KENCHUVE
By Sultan Ahmed Ismail. Translated from the Hindi original into English by Sushil Joshi. Illustrations: Veda Thozhur Kolleri
Eklavya, 2022, pp. 32, ₹ 120.00



Our Wiggly Friends, Earthworms is a small book of 32 pages. The book can be divided into two major parts; the first and the main part of the book provides various details about earthworms while the second part focuses on the role that earthworms play for soil, and introduces the readers to vermiculture (artificial rearing of earthworms).

I started reading this book with my son who is 8 years old. Initially, I was reading it for the sole purpose of writing a review, but my son insisted that I read it aloud to him, so that he could enjoy it too. We began reading, we looked at the cover page, and I read the name of the author and the illustrator and of course the title of the book, *Our Wiggly Friends, Earthworms.* I had just finished, and a question popped up… 'Friends??? How come they are called our friends? Can they be our friends? We are so different!!!' 'Let me read first' was the only response I had.

The first heading of the book is 'praise through the ages'. Interesting indeed! The reader acquires the crux of the paragraph that is to come ahead. Actually, all the headings are equally interesting and self-explanatory. Each is followed by a short paragraph providing some or the other facts about earthworms.

The book is rich in information. It is a mixed bag; there are some quotes and thoughts by poets, scientists and philosophers from old times, names used for earthworms in different languages across India, about their physiological and anatomical structures, their poops and pees and the burrows that they live in.

Yes!! A lot of information but neither of us lost interest; we still kept on reading. Could it have been because of the short length of the text? That was indeed one reason. Another factor was the selection of facts and the way of presenting them. Some information is simple to

connect with and understand, while some may be a bit technical in nature. There are many scientific terms used in the book. However, they don't hinder or kill the curiosity. What helped was an extremely reader-friendly, simple way of presenting them. At the end, a glossary is also provided covering all the scientific terms used in the text.

Some fascinating facts mentioned in the book were: number of species of the earthworms (3000!??), their lengths (the tiniest ones could be about 2.5 cms and the largest could be up to 1 metre long), that they come in a wide range of colours, that some of them are also bioluminescent (like fireflies). And they don't have noses!?? (This one opened up a whole new set of further questions...)

The third factor was the complementing visuals. The earthworm's burrows were looked for, located, their poop too; the photographs of each were taken. Alongside, there are illustrations and diagrams. When it comes to technical information such as the anatomy of outer body structures, it may get a little complicated to make sense despite the conversational approach of presenting the information. Referring to illustrations may definitely help the readers in making meaning of what is being discussed.

The latter half of the book talks about vermicompost—in an equally reader-friendly, simple and clear articulation; in a way that it appears to be easily doable (as it is), and subtly also makes readers curious to try out.

We both enjoyed reading the book and we are still reading it. To conclude, I would say, it's an interesting read, overall and an interesting reference book too!!

The Hindi version of the book is available with the title दिलकश केंचुए. It has been translated from English and is just as good. If one doesn't check the credit page, it might just be difficult to figure out which of the two is the original one.

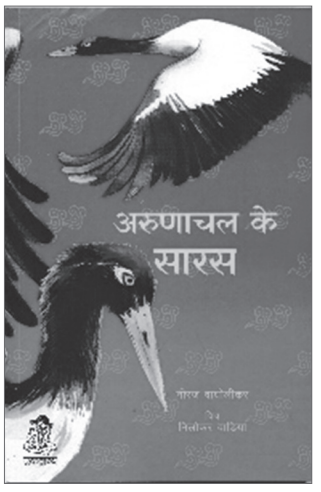
For the young readers who are just beginning to learn science, and are starting interaction with science texts, having more of such books will definitely help.

Sanket Raut*

ARUNACHAL KE SARAS (SAVING DALAI LAMA'S CRANES)

By Neeraj Wagholikar. Illustrations: Nilufar Wadia. Translated from the original English into Hindi by Sushil Joshi

Eklavya, 2022, pp. 59, ₹ 100.00



In our country, there are many huge multipurpose hydroelectricity (hydel) projects. These projects involve construction of dams, resulting in huge swathes of waterbodies called backwaters. These backwaters are not just used for electricity generation but are also a direct source for agricultural irrigation, industrial water supply, freshwater pisciculture and drinking purposes. Additionally, these can contribute indirectly to GDP as they can be turned into sites of tourist attraction.

It is believed that hydel power is a clean (zero pollution) source of energy generation. But, in reality, these waterbodies have a latent effect on the surrounding ecosystems and environment. They end up contributing to production of gases such as methane and carbon dioxide. Both these gases are contributors in global warming. Additionally, the creation of backwaters transforms (usually disrupts) the natural habitats and ecosystems of the areas surrounding them. The ecosystem from the submerged area gets decimated. Human displacement is the visible impact of dams, but these are the effects that it overshadows. These effects indeed have a greater impact on the climate as not just wildlife and habitats, but entire ecosystems are lost in the process.

Joy Adamson once said, 'Wildlife is something which man cannot construct. Once it is gone, it is gone forever.' Thus, it is imperative that such effects and incidents where ecosystem loss happens are brought to light—for adults and children alike. From that perspective the book *Arunachal Ke Saras* is noteworthy for me. The original work, *Saving Dalai Lama's Cranes* was published by Kalpavriksh, Pune.

Neeraj Wagholikar, the author, has a two-decade long engagement with various environment conservation studies and movements. He has garnered rich experience of North-Eastern India through travels and has studied the biodiversity and ecosystems of the region and their interactions and intersections with local cultures extensively. He has a keen interest in wildlife, legislature, litigation and governance. All this is reflected in the book as is his fluent and engaging language and writing style.

The tale takes place in the land of the rising sun, Tawang District of Arunachal Pradesh, the easternmost State in our country. It also happens to be the birthplace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama the XI, Sri Gyalewah Tsangyang. India's largest river, the Brahmaputra, flows through this region. The mountainous terrain makes it conducive for construction of dams. A few hydel projects, such as the Dibang valley project, have been proposed by the Indian government for a while. This story revolves around a young monk from Tawang named Tenjin, and his two friends Pema and Tara, who live in the city.

A dam is proposed on the river Nyamjang Chhoo, which flows through Tenjin's village. As Neeraj's accounts tell us, the river represents a robust ecosystem. But the dam has become a threat to it. Its construction is going to result in the loss of habitat for thousands of animals belonging to hundreds of species, many of which are indigenous and not found anywhere else. One such unfortunate/doomed species is the Black-Necked Crane. These cranes are the only ones that are found at such high altitudes. The birds migrate to Arunachal Pradesh from Ladakh and Tibet during winters, and settle in the districts of Tawang and Western Kameng. Sporadically found in India, Bhutan and China, they are very few in numbers. Called Thung Thung Karmo in the local language, the birds are of cultural importance to the locals of Tawang. Their mention can be found in his Holiness's books, and hence they are believed to be the embodiment of his spirit, and their arrival in the region is considered a good omen.

The story begins when his friends tell Tenjin that the dam, once complete, will decimate the habitat of his beloved cranes. The project is actually called to a halt by the experts, but the company tasked with the construction uses its corporate might to go ahead with the work. All this is backed by some bigshot bureaucrats. Pema and Tara come up with a meticulous plan to stop the habitat of the cranes from being destroyed. As per the plan, Tenjin needs to steal some documents. Does a dedicated monk like Tenjin commit a sin like theft to save the cranes? Is the habitat saved? What happens to the cranes? How do we respond when our morals and values are challenged, and our culture is threatened? What does one choose? Why? To seek answers to all such questions and mysteries, one should definitely read this book.

*Translated from Marathi to English by Aneesh Lavalekar.

In a developing country like India, many habitats are changing their face every day, threatening numerous species. Some have been pushed to the brink of extinction. There is a need to make the lay-people aware of these ill-effects. The annexure to the book (not to be missed) tells us how big hydel projects harm the environment.

The story though is free-flowing and intriguing. The language is simple and yet subtly encapsulates all the cultural nuances surrounding the cranes. The drawings of Nilufer Wadia go well along the story and add a layer of beauty to the book, keeping pace with the free-flowing narrative by Neeraj. Nilufer has done an exemplary job.

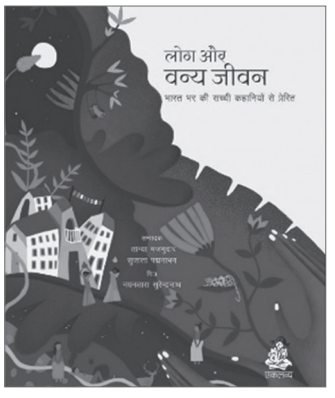
We don't usually get books that narrate such complex topics in such simple, direct and anecdotal manner. Especially for children's books this is a rarity. I believe all of us—young and old—should read this book to be aware of the development discourse.

Sanket Raut*

LOG AUR VANYA JEEVAN: BHARAT BHAR KI SACHCHEE KAHANIYON SE PRERIT

Edited by Tanya Majmudar and Sujatha Padmanabhan. Illustrations: Nayantara Surendranath. Translated from the original Hindi into English by Sushil Joshi

Eklavya, 2022, pp. 68, ₹ 175.00



India is a country blessed with rich biodiversity. It also is a nation developing at a great pace, locking horns with many other powerful global economies. But we need to keep in mind that development too, comes at a price. If development is not holistic and just anthropocentric, it doesn't take long for the environment to collapse on itself. Unfortunately, most of the world is facing these after-effects of anthropocentric development. Many forests and natural habitats of the forest dwellers, animals and creatures are being decimated and the ecosystems there are crumbling, as a result.

While most people are haplessly looking at these events, there are a few individuals, organizations and societies trying their best to put a stop to them. The book *Log aur Vanya Jeevan* is a compilation of success stories of such efforts. This is the Hindi translation of the book *People and Wildlife* published by Kalpavriksh, Pune. It consists of ten success stories of biodiversity conservation efforts, from across India. They not only acquaint us with various biodiversity conservation initiatives, but also with efforts that have been made to improve ecological conditions. Water pollution, increasing human-wildlife conflicts, trafficking of animal skin and organs, are just a few examples. In some senses, these stories play the role of guiding lights for us as well.

The narrative structure of all the stories has been kept similar. Along with scientific facts, they present interesting nuances in which the society interacts with the wild. These nuances may not stand the test of scientific evidence, but they do fit in with the local mythos and anecdotes. In the opinion of the writer, knowledge and understanding of these mythos and beliefs is key if one is to work with society in a participative manner.

To adapt and shift our traditions, beliefs and rituals with changing times and contextualizing them, in addition to adapting ourselves, we need to convince those around us about the necessity of this change. These stories tell us about where this is already happening. 'Chakhosang ka Tareeqa' by Tanya, or the psycho-social struggles of Medelo, a Naga youth from a traditionally hunter-gatherer community, are some examples. Another tale by Janki, titled 'Asadharan Bhaichara', unfolds the symbiotic relation that exists between a shepherd community named Dhangadh and wolves. It is a representation of how central wildlife is to our culture. The story is full of emotion, and makes us feel as if the entire Dhangadh community is the hero of the story.

The couple Ratanlal and Sundarabai Malu that feed fifteen thousand migratory birds of the species 'Domicile Crane' is the focus of the story 'Kheenchan ke Pakshigan'. Our religion and way of life is not just dependent on the ecosystem surrounding us but is in unison with it. That is the reason why the value of respecting all sorts of creatures and creeds is so ingrained in our society. The moment we lose that value, this path of development would certainly lead us to destruction and carnage.

The stories in this book make us believe that love, respect and affinity towards forests, environment and wildlife is still prevalent in our society. The support that both Mr. and Mrs. Malu get from their community and village is a testament to that. The book underlines the need, importance and beauty of such dedicated, people-led movements. These stories and people tell us that we may have lost our way, but if we put in a right step with full faith, there are a thousand hands who would join the cause.

The language used in the book is straight and simple. The seamless integration of local dialects with the central language is well blended. The idioms and anecdotes spread throughout the stories add to the beauty of the book. All this makes the book a valuable piece of literature. But, the quality of this book goes beyond its language. The drawings of Nayantara Surendranath have been used instead of wildlife photographs that are usually expected to feature in such books. The use of these drawings gives an artsy and cultural touch to the book, adding to its beauty. I believe that these drawings, their depth and their connection to (and representation of) the lore makes them as appealing to the adults as they can be catchy for the young readers.

The book, all in all, is a collection of neat stories that engage the audience. It has something for readers from all age groups and backgrounds.

Kishore Pawar

GHAR KE AASPAAS KE JEEV JANTU (घर के आसपास के जीव जन्तु**)**

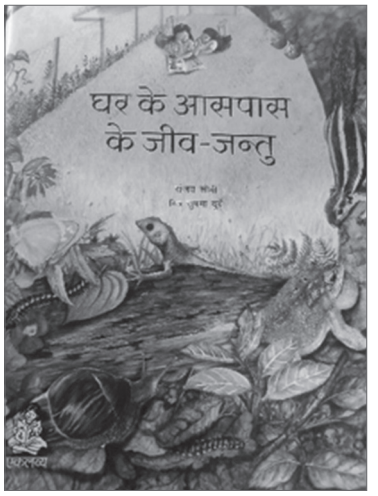
By Sanjay Sondhi. Translated from the original English into Hindi by Sushil Joshi. Illustrations: Sushma Durve

Eklavya, 2022, pp. 34, ₹ 110.00

We are not alone in this world. We are surrounded by different kinds of living beings and trees and plants. There is no place near or far from us where these living beings do not exist. A dark corner of the house, a wall, even the bark of trees, are home to many living things. And not only bark, even the leaves of trees are home to many different kinds of life-forms. There are eggs stuck on somewhere, and at other places you have caterpillars chomping on them!

*Translated from Marathi to English by Aneesh Lavalekar.

Some of these are visible to us with naked eyes, but many like bacteria and virus are generally invisible to us. I am sure you remember the Covid virus, and what a lockdown it caused.



This book gives us information about the life forms around us that we often see, but we don't have anyone to tell us about them. This book has tried to fulfil that gap. Whatever we have always wanted to know about birds, butterflies, lizards, frogs and spiders—this book tells us all about them and much more; and not only tells, but also shows us many things.

The authors of this book have a command over the art of spinning fine stories with minute and detailed observations of the natural world. The animal-gatherings, laced with the special information nuggets in fine festoon-like print, give this book a special place among the usual story-books meant for children. The narrative style is so communicative and direct, as one reads it, it feels as though the author is speaking to the reader. The scientific facts and interesting information pieces have mixed so well with each other, it's like sugar in tea! The part that narrates the story of muttering pigeons and the magic of moon moth have been written well in simple words. They come alive while reading; it seems like a short film is being played and these animals and insects are running around in front of our eyes.

In all, the book takes its readers on a fantastic journey into the world of living beings around us. Although the book focuses on the world of living beings, the illustrations have recreated the whole eco-system of these life forms. The visuals designed by Sushma Durve speak to the reader. They present an image of the environment of the living beings being discussed in every detail, and the entire world of these animals, birds and insects comes alive. They seem to be hopping and leaping in front of our very eyes! The detail in which every leaf has been painted is amazing. The lizard and mongoose appear as if they would jump out of the pages and start walking around us! In the section on moon moths, the illustrations of the tussar silk-moth eggs, caterpillars on the leaves of jungle-berry trees and the moth coming out of a cocoon are excellent. If these details had been incorporated in the textual part, the synergy between text and image could have been further enhanced.

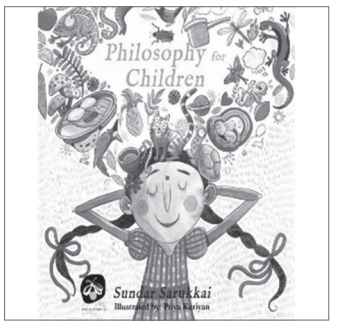
There seems to be some confusion in the text about lizards and innocent predators. Calling a lizard 'gecko' and a chameleon a 'garden lizard' could cause factual confusion in the reader. Writing about them with more clarity would have made the book scientifically fool-proof.

In the end, a few words about the Hindi translation. Mud-puddling in butterflies has been translated as *keechad snaan* (कीचड़ स्नान). The phenomenon of mud-puddling is better described as *keechad chooshan* (कीचड़ चूषण) since in this, the butterflies don't just sit on mud or sand but they suck sodium and amino acids through their proboscis. Similarly, the term used for the natural world as *prakritik vishva* (प्राकृतिक विश्व) seems out of place. *Prakritik jagat* (प्राकृतिक जगत) or *prakritik duniya* (प्राकृतिक दुनिया) would have been better options.

The design aspect of the book–lay-out, fonts and sizes, margins and their use–are all outstanding. The book will prove to be a microscope for young readers where they are able to look at everything around them in minute detail and develop a keen and observant eye. This, hopefully, will bring them to develop a life-long relationship with the natural world around them.

Radhika Chhaparia

PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN: THINKING, READING, WRITING
By Sundar Sarukkai. Illustrations: Priya Kuriyan
Jugnoo, 2021, pp. vi+72, ₹ 175.00



In most countries, philosophy as a subject of study is open to students only at the undergraduate level. However, in the last four decades or so, many have argued that there is a dire need to introduce philosophy to students at a much earlier stage, preferably from middle school years onward. According to the proponents of this view, introducing philosophy at this age enables students to critically engage with what they learn and experience, both in school and outside. There are also some who hold the view that the questions that philosophers pursue are among those that children raise themselves and that children should be encouraged to engage with them further. These questions may include whether or not god exists, whether moral principles are relative or absolute, and whether the world as we know it is in fact an illusion. Unfortunately, this view has found little resonance among educationists in India.

Sundar Sarukkai and his friends at Barefoot Philosophers deserve congratulations and our gratitude for organizing summer camps since 2019 for school children to engage with philosophy and Sarukkai for writing this book. So, how does Sarukkai try to do philosophy with children? He avoids the two usual routes: one, presenting what different philosophers, such as Nagarjuna or Plato, have written; two, discussing different areas in philosophy, such as metaphysics and epistemology, and the questions that are taken up for exploration in these areas. Nowhere in the book do we encounter names of philosophers or state-of-the-art terms used in the discipline. Instead, he adopts an approach that has three strands (though never explicitly delineated): 1. encouraging students to ask questions without fear and find both joy and value in asking and pursuing these questions as they occur to them (why do we need to act morally, or rather merely following one or another moral maxim); 2. guiding students to observe the way one thinks and takes notice of the processes and steps involved and the direction of one's thoughts (how does one imagine an object or a situation, or what is one doing when one is doing mathematics); and 3. showing how fearlessness in thinking accompanied by careful attention to how one thinks can enable students to raise and pursue philosophical questions, such as when do words and expressions come to have meaning, what are the limits of one's imagination, why and how one should think about the grounds for one's moral actions, and so on.

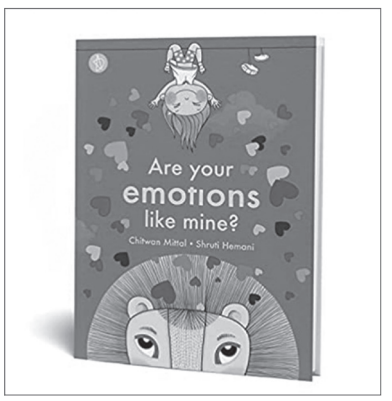
The eight chapters in Sarukkai's book are titled 'Seeing', 'Thinking', 'Reading', 'Writing', (doing) 'Mathematics', (creating works of) 'Art', 'Being good', and 'Learning'. The choice of these activities is based on the claim that students engage with these as part of their life at school and that these activities are rich and complex enough to start thinking philosophically. Almost every chapter has a similar structure: beginning by inviting the reader to closely observe the specific activity one is involved in and proceeding to show how what one is engaged in can occasion a range of questions one may not have paid enough attention to before. Let's consider the chapter on Seeing. It begins by asking what seeing is all about and what are the various things one does when one is seeing something. This discussion then leads to asking questions about the nature of

perception, the relationship between seeing and imagining, and whether dreaming is a form of seeing. But this discussion also paves the way for asking whether an object we perceive over time is the same or a different one, and if one can reliably distinguish between whether one is awake or one is dreaming. Similarly, the chapter on mathematics invites the reader to ask what the nature of mathematical entities such as numbers is, but equally, also to reflect on the nature of mathematics as a domain of inquiry and the nature of thinking this domain requires you to do.

While Sarukkai's achievements are significant for a short book, there are also problems galore in the way it is written. For want of space, only two are pointed out. First, the book raises a considerable number of issues within a small set of paragraphs, but with almost no sustained discussion on any of these. This is reflected in the lack of clues about possible ways to respond to these questions. Parts of the chapters on mathematics and moral questions are exceptions. Two, there are several questions raised in this book (for instance, why does a chair appear in a certain way when looked at from a certain corner of a room?) that one may respond to with an empirical explanation (because the light falls on the object at a certain angle). But does philosophical reflection cease to have any further possibility when an empirical answer is found? Or does the example of the chair hold possibilities for further questions? In such cases, what Sarukkai seems to be missing is an opportunity to show how a great many fascinating questions are waiting to be asked even when we think an empirical response has exhausted all that can be inquired into. Finally, one wishes the volume had included a short list of books (and movies!) that students can read to take them further in their encounter with philosophy.

Shubhra Seth

ARE YOUR EMOTIONS LIKE MINE?
By Chitwan Mittal and Shruti Hemani
AdiDev Press, 2021, ₹ 699.00



This book is a canvas of emotions that all age groups paint in their minds every day. For children it is like a picture dictionary where they can identify if unable to express in words as to how they are feeling at a given point of time. The pages take the young readers on a roller coaster ride of happiness, to frowns and smiles, fear and dare, triumph and the importance of living each day looking at the brighter side of the world. Inner light, to breathe and let it all seep, are important expressions for children of today who are made to adapt to gadgets readily than human beings around them. Chitwan Mittal through this work has taken forward another episode in value education for children through minimal but well mapped vocabulary. The choice of a girl as the protagonist and her emotional expressions are an important message for the readers across age groups. The lion with a mane as the little girl's companion is a refreshing change from the teddy bear world of stuff toys. For the Indian readers this combination of a girl and her lion companion may also remind them of mythological characters. The concluding page which mentions the importance of soul strength and inner light is a pertinent anchor for all age groups particularly children who are growing up observing and absorbing everything that goes around in their home and surroundings. This book has no page numbers which delightfully says that there is no sequence of emotions and one can feel them sometime or every time, with or without any meaning.

The illustrations done by Shruti Hemani are outstanding and bring alive the emotions on every page. The conundrums of emotions like frown, scowl and smile speak volumes through the two figures. With the shower of colourful hearts on the cover page, upside down figures and a bonus page of stickers, this book gives a feel good factor even when it quietly awaits on the bookshelf. The illustrations depicting the lion in varying shapes, sometimes real life and at other times becoming small toy like, can be read as an additional story by children who connect to the animal kingdom through their emotions and imagination. The sketch of the Pink City is marvellous and Shruti Hemani deserves praise for the detailing. Not only to understand their own emotions but also to draw simple human and animal figures, trees and surroundings the illustrations can double up as a drawing book too.

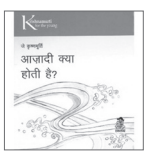
The book with its well defined words and corresponding illustrations are an important contribution for children who may not be able to express themselves through spoken words. The hearing and speech impaired children may be able to communicate with their parents and teachers through the help of this book. The pictures will enable them to understand their own emotions like any other child around them. This book along with making an important contribution in value education, can also become a bridge between spoken words and expressions of children who live in a world of perpetual silence amidst all the noise around them. Maybe the author and illustrator duo can design their next creative endeavour for these special little friends of ours.

Shashi Sablok

KHYAL RAKHNA KYA HOTA HAI?
By J Krishnamurthy. Translated from the original English by Mukesh Gupta
Eklavya, 2022, pp. 32, ₹ 80.00

DAR DARATA KYON HAI?
By J Krishnamurthy. Translated from the original English by Mukesh Gupta
Eklavya, 2022, pp. 28, ₹ 80.00

AZAADI KYA HOTI HAI?
By J Krishnamurthy. Translated from the original English by Mukesh Gupta
Eklavya, 2022, pp. 28, ₹ 80.00



This happened a few days ago. A new-born calf strayed into our lane. Tender, delicate. Such beautiful bright eyes. Tottering in the lane she mooed so loud that quite a few people came out of their houses. The calf continued to call, looking this way and that. Gradually more and more people gathered. They surrounded her. Someone opened their garden gate. People took her inside with care. There was fear writ large in the calf's eyes. Fear of being separated from the mother. Of being surrounded by strangers.

People offered water, but she neither ate nor drank anything. After a while her mooing slowed down. Some people went off to look for the mother cow. Other people came. The calf was visibly agitated. Everyone tried pat her to calmness. People kept advising and consulting each other. Standing there with fear and concern, everyone was perhaps wishing the same thing.

Suddenly, there was loud mooing from a distance.

'Mother has come, mother has come!'

'Clear the way.'

'Let her come.'

'Let the calf go to her.'

There was a lot of hue and cry. People sighed in relief. Every heart was filled with respite.

After reuniting with her calf, the cow licked her for a long time. Many of the people standing there saw tears in the calf's eyes; though there were no tears. So many hearts melted. For the children who had witnessed this incident, there was certainly something planted in their hearts that day. The seed of love. They must have felt fear too on that day. And bonding. Caring. Togetherness. That day, returning after bidding farewell to the mother-child, every individual was a changed person. Little more open. Loving. Happy.

These and many such memories brushed past my mind while reading these three small but very big books by J Krishnamurthy. I was reminded of Chekhov's story—'Grief'—in which a man embraces his horse and shares his pain.

- ख्याल रखना क्या होता है
- डर डराता क्यों है
- आज़ादी क्या होती है

These three books give us an opportunity to stop and take a look at ourselves, deep inside. We get to know our feelings, emotions, memories, fears….In this effort, perhaps, we can also know what kind of a human we would be if we didn't have these within.

What kind of a person devoid of love is?

What do they think?

How do they navigate their sorrows?

What kind of feelings would a tree, river or hill, or a sad fragile human create in their minds?

Where is the source of fear—within us or outside?

The people (including children) who have experienced these books would feel little more connected with themselves. They would be able to see their fears properly, as also the impact of those fears on them. It will be so liberating to see squarely in the face of the fear that may have controlled for years their way of thinking, comprehending and doing anything creative. Only when they will see the fears in the eye will they be able to find the way past them. And when they see their own fears, they will also be able to feel the fears of others. Going to others—whether they are humans, animals, plants, the river or the hills—makes us sensitive towards them. We start caring for them. Krishnamurthy says that if you learn to feel in your childhood, it stays with you forever. Otherwise, our emotions become cold. We are unable to feel anything. He then questions, what kind of humans will the children of such people be? What kind of thoughts come to them? How will they fare in times of sadness and pain? Isn't this thought itself so scary?

In today's times, when the world is changing so fast, when there is so much hullaballoo all around, this statement becomes even more relevant. It is much more necessary today to stop at some point and look at things. And when you look at things, it should be so that your prejudices do not colour what you see. Here, Krishnamurthy warns that school education shouldn't be allowed to supress these things. History, Maths and Science are necessary. But only when, at the foundation there is a sensitive and receptive mind. He says that classrooms are often closed. You cannot see outside. The breeze, fragrance, butterfly… all are outside. Exams, the scare of marks, the race for income… all ruin your life. Childhood is full of imagination, of stories. But when you grow up, you are told that all this is false. It is a punishment.

Reading these books is also like constantly asking yourself questions. The reel of your past life comes alive for you. These books give you the lens and the necessary courage to stop that reel at places to review it, and find those junctures where you may have done something differently had you read these books in your childhood. Krishnamurthy does not wipe away the emotions like jealousy, anger, cruelty—that are seen as 'negative'. In *Azaadi Kya Hoti Hai*, he talks about freeing ourselves from anger, but in *Khyal Rakhna Kya Hota Hai*, he thinks anger is a necessary emotion. When we use anger to not allow ourselves to be used by others, it is an essential emotion. If this is not done, then the exploitation of the disadvantaged will continue. In such cases, anger works as a safety jacket.

In *Azaadi Kya Hoti Hai*, Krishnamurthy's statement, that there can be no freedom without a system, held me back for a long time. My mind was not ready to accept this. I kept searching for contrary examples from my own and my friends' lives. I was reminded of Vinod Kumar Shukla's story —*Vyavastha*—in which a particular kind of system had been crafted to enslave people, and imposed on them. But that was a system created by an exploitative ruler. The system that Krishnamurthy talks about is expansive in nature. He says that if you are not free to listen carefully, see deeply and take care of others, then too, there is no system in your life. The enigma of freedom and system is one of the most crucial and difficult puzzles of life. He further elaborates, freedom or *azaadi* does not mean that we do as we like. Rather, we have to struggle with ourselves to do what we really want to do. And this requires intelligence, sensitivity and understanding.

The three books came across to me as a continuum. And I realized that awareness about oneself and about others, about love, respect, acceptance… is the core of life. Without these, the school or college degree is useless.

I could not but be impressed with the Hindi translation by Mukesh Gupta. Thanks to Eklavya to have brought out these books in such a wonderful way.

Ragini Lalit

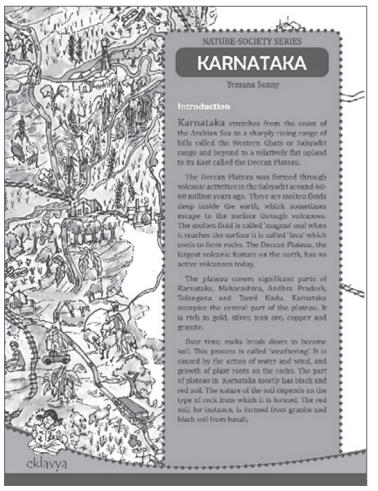
KARNATAKA

By Yemuna Sunny. Illustrations: Trripurari Sharma
Eklavya, Nature-Society Series, 2022, pp. 16, ₹ 80.00

This booklet about Karnataka comes as a new addition to the ongoing Nature-Society Series authored by Yemuna Sunny, which finds ways to think in innovative and imaginative ways about maps. With its striking sketch map and detailed artwork by Trripurari Singh, the book engages with socio-spatial transformations and seeks to converge 'cartography and art, nature and society, information and criticality, map and text, and knowledge and change' in the words of the author.

Often the practice of school geography deals with the realm of the physical and the human as two independently existing entities.

The study of physical features in an area, say, a river, can be completely silent on the issue of developmental projects, displacement, treaties, disputes or any other socio-political processes. Similarly, while climate change will be part of most course work in schools and list 'human domination of nature' as one cause among many others, it's often without any structural, contextually rooted or even evolving questioning of the human-nature discourse.


NATURE-SOCIETY SERIES
KARNATAKA
Yemuna Sunny
Introduction
Karnataka stretches from the coast of the Arabian Sea to a sharply rising range of hills called the Western Ghats or Sahyadri range and beyond to a relatively flat upland to its East called the Deccan Plateau.
The Deccan Plateau was formed through volcanic activities in the Sahyadri around 60-66 million years ago. There are molten fluids deep inside the earth, which sometimes escape to the surface through volcanoes. The molten fluid is called 'magma' and when it reaches the surface it is called 'lava' which cools to form rocks. The Deccan Plateau, the largest volcanic feature on the earth, has no active volcanoes today.
The plateau covers significant parts of Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Tamil Nadu. Karnataka occupies the central part of the plateau. It is rich in gold, silver, iron ore, copper and granite.
Over time, rocks break down to become soil. This process is called 'weathering'. It is caused by the action of water and wind, and growth of plant roots on the rocks. The part of plateau in Karnataka mostly has black and red soil. The nature of the soil depends on the type of rock from which it is formed. The red soil, for instance, is formed from granite and black soil from basalt.
eklavya

The map booklets that comprise the Nature-Society Series published by Eklavya are part of an important tool to visualize new conversations around the traditionally important parameters related to maps, like boundaries, scale, colours, resource-concentrations, physical features, etc., and at the same time, they open possibilities to allow for heterogeneity and plurality in what makes up a region, explore the evolving interdependence of territories with resources, the inseparability of society and nature, interrogate the dynamic histories and living presents which make a region, and the economic models that affect the society-nature relationship.

The booklet on Karnataka is concerned with the plurality of the 22 languages, more than six religious identities, and countless food habits including jowar, sea-food, meat, ragi, wheat, rice, fish. etc., that comprises the approx. 61 million people that make up Karnataka. In the various relationships that people hold with nature, the booklet invites us to reflect on aspects of the socio-spatial such as, the difference in speed and quantity of production between factory-produced goods and handloom or large-scale profit-oriented production of coffee, areca, sugarcane, tea plantations, or mechanized mass fishing and its connection to over-exploitation of land and the sea. The differences in relationships within a society based on relationships to nature considers the examples of fishing or tribal communities where lack of excess wealth often translates to more egalitarian social relations, whereas societies shaped through a system of capital ensures the maintenance of caste, class and gender structures and the dominance of an elite few.

The text is interspersed with questions that involve thinking, reading between the lines, evaluating, feeling, and acting or doing. For instance: in exploring the implications of climate change on say, changing rainfall patterns within the State, or declining fish varieties– the text accompanying the map asks the readers to join the dots between the local and global effects of climate change, or ideas on collective action to reduce human-made problems. At another place, in talking of the diversity of people in Karnataka (including 50 tribes) and the various patterns of inequalities and power, the text lends voice to the many communities that don't occupy the 'mainstream' voice in Karnataka, especially in the context of recent attempts to saffronize school education in the State.

The accessible language of the booklet will make this map a comfortable read for middle or high school students and will be valuable resource for critical and sensitive adults looking to create spaces for dialogue and inquiry with maps as a pedagogical tool. Making the books of this series accessible in a multiplicity of languages would take them from niche or already resourced audiences to classrooms and teachers of various kinds. Priced at Rs 80, the map is packed densely with information, including the cover, back cover. There are further references and link to a detailed bibliography for interested readers and the text is sprinkled with boxes on specific issues like the Kaveri dispute, Basavanna's legacy and Bhakti movement within Karnataka, etc. In the face of the current politics of exclusion based on fear and hate, this resource book is filled with examples that counter the monolithic identity of Karnataka that dominant groups would like us to believe. The map on Karnataka combines information with tools to think independently and critically, it reminds us to be attentive to structural causes and envision critical alternatives, in a way that will invite questions, observations and rich discussions in any learning space that it is brought into.

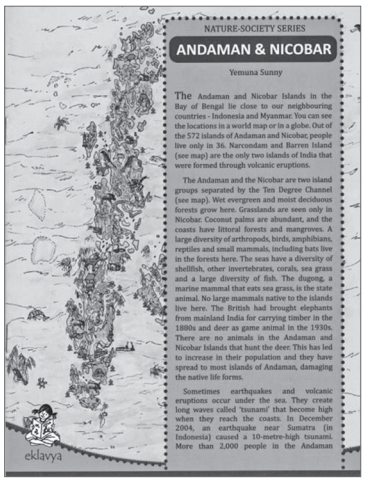
Bharat Kidambi

ANDAMAN & NICOBAR

By Yemuna Sunny. Illustrations: Trripurari Sharma

Eklavya Foundation, 2022, ₹ 60.00

This slim book packs a lot of interesting information facts and figures about Andaman and Nicobar, Union Territory of India. Located in the Bay of Bengal with close proximity to Indonesia and Myanmar, these 572 islands (of which only 36 are inhabited) are very strategic for India's maritime interest. The relatively untouched beauty of the islands are increasingly facing the twin threats of growing commercialization and large infrastructure projects (such as deep water ports) that many environmentalists and ecologists feel will disturb the ecological balance of these islands which have a rich bio-diversity.


NATURE-SOCIETY SERIES
ANDAMAN & NICOBAR
Yemuna Sunny
The Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal lie close to our neighbouring countries - Indonesia and Myanmar. You can see the locations in a world map or in a globe. Out of the 572 islands of Andaman and Nicobar, people live only in 36. Narcondam and Barren Island (see map) are the only two islands of India that were formed through volcanic eruptions.
The Andaman and the Nicobar are two island groups separated by the Ten Degree Channel (see map). Wet evergreen and moist deciduous forests grow here. Grasslands are seen only in Nicobar. Coconut palms are abundant, and the coasts have littoral forests and mangroves. A large diversity of arthropods, birds, amphibians, reptiles and small mammals, including bats live in the forests here. The seas have a diversity of shellfish, other invertebrates, corals, sea grass and a large diversity of fish. The dugong, a marine mammal that eats sea grass, is the state animal. No large mammals native to the islands live here. The British had brought elephants from mainland India for carrying timber in the 1880s and deer as game animal in the 1930s. There are no animals in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands that hunt the deer. This has led to increase in their population and they have spread to most islands of Andaman, damaging the native life forms.
Sometimes earthquakes and volcanic eruptions occur under the sea. They create long waves called 'tsunami' that become high when they reach the coasts. In December 2004, an earthquake near Sumatra (in Indonesia) caused a 10-metre-high tsunami. More than 2,000 people in the Andaman
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Written in a simple and informative style, the book provides rich information by tracing the history of the island and its people. From the colonial rulers (Denmark occupied it in 1756 and sold it to Britain in 1869) to being a Union Territory of India (became part of Indian republic in 1950); the author provides interesting information on the local population especially the tribal population and their relationship with the ecology. This relationship is increasingly coming under stress with multiple development and infrastructure projects that are being undertaken across the major islands of Andaman and Nicobar.

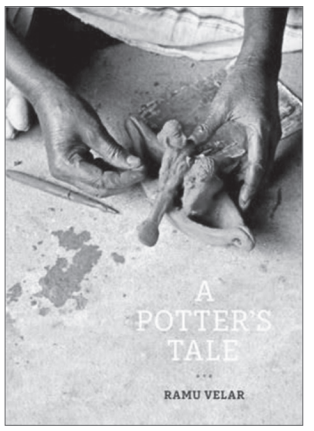
The famous Ross Island, which was the British headquarters, today a tourist attraction, was badly damaged during the tsunami that hit the island in 2004 (more than 2000 people were killed and 40,000 were rendered homeless across the Andaman and Nicobar islands).

The interesting feature of this book is a detailed map, which not just gives the topology as is usually the practice, but also a wide variety of other information like the flora and fauna, key landmarks and defence establishments.

This would be very useful for school students.

Laila Tyabji

A POTTER'S TALE
By Ramu Velar. Translated from the original Tamil by V. Geetha
Design: Ragini Siruguri. Illustrations: Emanuele Scanziani
Tara Books, 2021, pp. 159, ₹ 850.00



Tara Books is doing something fantastic. In its Makers series, it is bringing us the voices of craftspeople and folk artists, traditionally anonymous and unheard. I raved about their previous book on the Gond painters of Patangarh and their work, and now here is a new one, *A Potter's Tale*, on Ramu Velar, a master potter from Tamil Nadu. In both it is the craftspeople who speak for themselves, rather than an art critic interpreting the work for us, and giving it his or her own urban spin. The perspective can be strikingly different. Working with craftspeople over the last 45 years, I've realized their craft is so instinctive to them that they do not intellectualize or romanticize the creative process in the way many other artists do. For some it's a form of worship, for others a means of earning a living.

There's something eternally fascinating about a potter and his craft. The spin of the wheel, added by a foot, the hands giving the lump of clay a form, and then with a flick of the thumb or fingers giving it a curve or elongating it, adding decorative patterns with a stick or fingernail. It seems so effortless. When I was in art school aeons ago, I took pottery as one of my optional subjects, and soon realized how incredibly difficult that effortlessness actually was. In Ramu Velar's words, 'To be a good potter you need to know three things. First, mud and clay, their properties and how they behave. Second, measurement and proportion...Third, what makes the difference in "fine" work.'

My pot would fall sideways, or become inescapably skewed, my armatures always collapsed. My classmate Shamshad, MF Husain's son, would always have to come to my rescue, and in my second year I gave it up for graphics! As Ramu Velar tells us, 'To get this basic shape of things, you need to know it deep inside of you. A whale or plane, you can do what you want, but you need to get the basic form right...' That inner knowledge is the key, everything else then becomes instinctive.

No wonder the potter is often a metaphor in Indian mythology and literature for the Master Creator.

The book is intensely readable and very moving, with Ramu Velar telling his own story in simple, powerful words, skilfully translated by V. Geetha. 'I'm a potter', the book begins, 'My grandfather was a potter, and so was my father.' It is his story, but also that of lakhs of craftspeople all over India.

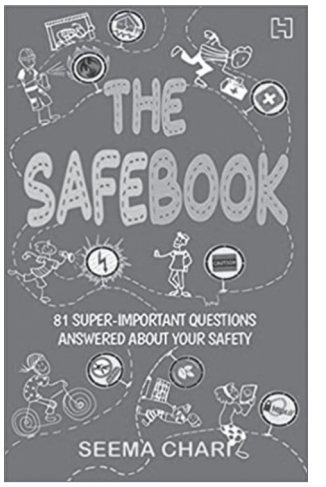
My only caveat is, that in trying to bring the technique, the maker, the product, and the local ambience to life, the page layouts are far too busy. True, one picture is worth a thousand words, but a plethora of both photographs and illustrations, (plus sometimes an additional couple of bold twirly lines!) all on one page is visually distracting and an overkill. In contrast the double page photographs that precede each chapter are absolutely beautiful in their evocative simplicity.

So are the photographs of Ramu Velar himself. Whether working, talking about his craft, or in prayer, his face has a radiant warmth, openness, and ease. Many great craftspeople have this look of being content and complete in themselves and their art. (It was a look Gandhiji had too, as he helped craft this country of ours).

Books like *A Potter's Tale* open eyes, hearts and minds to our extraordinary craft traditions. This is important, as today's youth normally see only the finished product—usually in a craft mela, with the craftsperson as the supplicant, sitting at floor level and subjected to the ignominy of bargaining. Respect for craftspeople, both as skilled professionals and as artists, is something that needs to be taught at every level. This book is one small step in that direction.

Aditya Karnik

THE SAFEBOOK: 81 SUPER-IMPORTANT QUESTIONS ANSWERED ABOUT YOUR SAFETY
By Seema Chari
Hachette India, 2022, pp. 256, ₹ 499.00

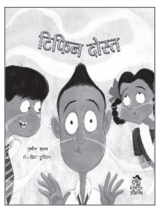


'Better safe than sorry.' A quote told to all in their childhood and one that stays relevant to this date. As the title suggests, the premise of the book revolves around this quote. Comprising 240 pages and ten sections, the book covers various topics from fire to the internet. A type of instructional book, it gives a guide to staying safe in daily life. Full of captivating illustrations and enjoyable quizzes, the book is not a mere mundane instructional manual but an intriguing and creatively written guide.

In a world that is constantly plagued by danger, a world where the environment is degrading, and a world where global peace sounds like a utopian dream, this book is needed now more than ever. It talks about the dangers of daily life and ways to tackle them. From Do's and Don'ts to checklists, it has many interesting writing styles. From answering simple questions about how fire is caused to addressing complex questions about the use of immersion rods, this book covers it all. The author discusses yet another interesting example of the downsides of removing the ground pin from a plug. Mistunee Chowdhury has further made this book interesting by making attractive relatable images. Each chapter is also accompanied by a statistic and a concluding statement. The only criticism of this book would be the repetitive format of the chapters.

Informative and appealing, *The Safebook* by Seema Chari is a must-read to learn to lead a safe life in current times. Anyone above the age of 11 can read this book. Parents can also read this book to their children to give them life-saving tips. I would rate this book a 4 out of 5.

Book News ***Book News***

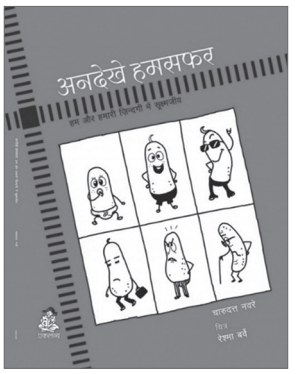


Tiffin Dost by Sushil Shukla and illustrated by Priya Kurian tells us about: Three classmates! Three delicious tiffins!! And a poem describing the scrumptious exchange…

Eklavya, 2022, p. 12, ₹ 60.00

Vineeta Bal

ANDEKHE HUMSAFAR: HUM AUR HAMARI ZINDAGI ME SOOKSHMAJEEV
By Charudatta Navare. Illustrations: Reshma Barve. Translated from the original English into Hindi by Kokil Chaudhary
Eklavya, 2021, pp. 42, ₹ 75.00



Writing a non-fiction comic book for children on a rapidly developing area in science with many unknowns, is a major challenge. Charudatta Navare and Reshma Barve have done a remarkably good job of it. *Andekhe Humsafar* is a Hindi translation of the original *A Germ of an Idea*. While the author has used his biology background as a great strength, Barve's contribution as an artist is equally important to convey the complex scientific concepts with the help of illustrations. Using fewer words and a lot of drawing is the necessity for this kind of a book, with both words and drawings having a significant contribution to the content. Kokil Chaudhary deserves a lot of credit for a smooth translation which does not read like a translation.

What is the book about? It is about microbiome. Microbiome in itself is a relatively new concept in biological science. Ever since the microscope was discovered, biologists have been able to 'see' micro-organisms such as bacteria and fungi. Viruses were 'seen' much later, only after the discovery of an electron microscope. Until then we believed in what we could see. Hence, we used to think that our washed skins are 'clean'; when we put a mask on our face, as Jain *sadhvis* do, we are keeping the live creatures out of our system. Little did we know then that these micro-organisms can happily go through the masks. When Covid-19 hit us and we were recommended to use N95 masks.

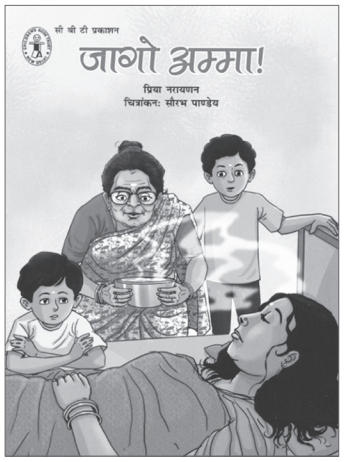
The book takes us into the world of micro-organisms which are in and around us. It tells us that they are a non-exclusive part of our lives, and we cannot really be healthy in their absence. The micro-organisms which normally reside in our gut, throat, nose, lungs, eyes, skin etc., are predominantly harmless and they form our 'microbiome'. Microbiome is described as a community of micro-organisms which are found living together in a specified habitat. In normal circumstances this co-living community does not pose any risk to the host such as us. In fact, we can and do use many chemicals produced by our gut microbiome for our healthy living, such as vitamins. But things can go wrong with the microbiome as well. Over the past 30-odd years, and more so in the last decade, scientists have published thousands of papers describing, characterizing microbiome. Presence or absence of certain bacteria from the microbiome are associated with certain diseases such as ulcerative colitis. Obesity is also shown to be associated with some specific components of the microbiome.

Hindi translations of the original English sub-headings are also extremely interesting. For example, title of one chapter 'The "Liverage" that Microbes Have' is translated as '*Jigar aur Uske Jigaree Dost*'. 'Gut feelings' is translated as '*Andarunee Ehasas*'. Hindi titles catch the spirit but convey the sense in different ways!

A complex subject with evolving knowledge means a limitation on its simplification for lay readers. Thus, this book will be of interest only to the senior school students, certainly not young ones. If one is expecting a story book rather than a serious book, this will not fit the bill.

Seema

WAKE UP AMMA!
By Priya Narayanan. Illustrations: Saurabh Pandey
Children's Book Trust, 2021, pp. 16, ₹ 60.00



The crux of the story is that the sun is up in the sky and why is Amma still sleeping?

From one stand-point, this is a very small, simple story that tries to capture a very small slice of time-frame and space. But if you read it again after a while, some hazy images start emerging in your mind. For instance, a woman sleeping till late on a Sunday, and that too when all the others in the household—children and adults alike—are already awake, but this woman is sleeping like a log!

Be it a Sunday or any other day of the week, in our social construct, all days are almost the same for women…wake up the first in the morning, make breakfast for the family, send the kids to school, help the husband prepare for office, then prepare lunch for all, take care of the elderly in the family, and so on. In some sense, their entire day is spent in making sure that all others in the family can do their work comfortably. Women hardly ever get free time for themselves. And if they happen to be working women, then finding even a moment of free time becomes even more difficult.

This is the story of almost every household. In this scenario, the image portrayed in this book of a woman sleeping away with no concern about the rest of the family—gives me some happiness being a woman, but also seems a bit awkward. Awkward because the family shown in the illustrations seem to be the kind which had probably never seen any such thing happen till now. No wonder the kids are worried that the mother hasn't woken up.

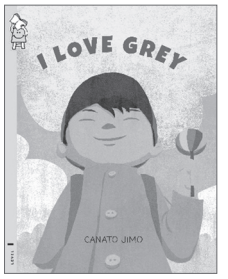
You do not get any idea even till the end of the story as to why the mother was sleeping till so late. At times, giving an open end like this gives a chance to readers to complete the story as they wish. However, in this book, it comes across as a tale of missing links!

The illustrations in the book are not very attractive. They don't invite the reader to keep turning the pages and explore. The illustrations have just turned the text of the story into visuals, and the same goes for the cover image too. And this is in spite of the fact that a lot of room has been given to the illustrations on every page. This could have been used as an opportunity to add to the textual narrative of the story, but that remains an opportunity lost.

Shivani Bajaj

I LOVE GREY
By Canato Jimo
Pratham Books, 2021, pp. 18, ₹ 50.00

Picture books, as a genre, are helpful in the early stages of reading. True to its genre, the book, *I Love Grey*, with its full page and sometimes double-spread illustrations and short sentences, gives ample space for imagination and reading practice.



The text is simple, with some repetition—the phrase, 'I love'—appears on each page, qualifying it further for a beginner's reading book. A concept book of sorts, it mentions a lot of colours, while connecting them to everyday incidents, objects and even feelings, in the life of a 5-6-year-old child.

Canato Jimo is an illustrator from Nagaland, who sometimes writes as well. He says he visualizes his stories and then balances it with text. Canato says in an interview that he loves the use of white spaces and this shows clearly in this book. A lot is left to the imagination of the reader and children have the option of filling up the space mentally and physically. Canato's illustrations have soft pastels, facial features of the characters are similar to those of the North East—and high time there was some representation from that part of the country! Apart from the features and the shawl that Tokato's father dons on the last page, there is no other indication to say that this book is placed in Nagaland. There is a glimpse of the landscape and the terrain on one page, but it could belong to any mountainous region.

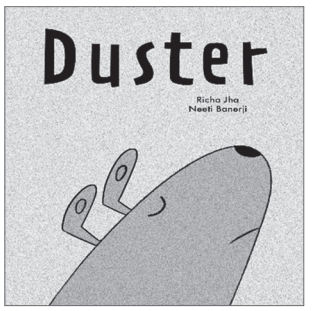
I Love Grey is all about colours; not just identifying colours, but the association with each colour. What is colour, if not a 'coloured' thing? Tokato loves grey, because rainy days are grey and he enjoys splashing in the puddles on a rainy day, loves the colour orange and green perhaps because those are the colours of his favourite vegetables, loves the colour blue with some yellow perhaps because he loves clear skies and sunny days. Though the theme is colour, illustrations are based on routine things that happen in the boy's life on a daily basis. It offers a glimpse into his simple, yet memorable day. Right from when he goes to school to what he does there to what he eats and his journey back, everything for him is one colour or another.

The book offers a chance to the readers to explore their connection to colours. What does the colour yellow remind you of? Sunflowers, the sun, a bright day? Or fear, fire or some illness? Is it a happy colour or a sad colour? The colour green by itself is not refreshing, but greenery and grass and the open fields make green refreshing. The idiom 'green with envy', is the flipside of green. In fact, while colours evoke or represent a mood, the context determines our connection to that colour. This 18-page book with very little text opens up a host of questions for the reader to ask and find answers to and to explore within. For not only do colours remind the boy of things, but also experiences and moments... moments that are loving and precious. Moments that connect to colour in a way that makes that particular colour extra special. Thus the book endorses values of togetherness and warmth in relationships.

Life is colourful. And joyful. Even the usually gloomy colours mean joy to Tokato. There is nothing to mar his joy, surprisingly so. One page at least could have captured his worry or apprehension. Might have made it more real, believable, relatable for the reader.

Deepti Saini

DUSTER
By Richa Jha. Illustrations: Neeti Banerji
Pickle Yolk, 2021, pp. 32, ₹ 350.00



Duster is about a dog who is not really a dog. Or is he a dog but no one believes so? Duster likes things that a cat likes and he dislikes things that a dog is supposed to like. His human is disappointed in him for not behaving like a dog. Duster tries his best to be a dog but is unable to keep up the performance for long. His human then brings another dog—Buster. Is Buster really a dog? Is he a cat too? We do not get to know. But Duster the dog finds peace with himself and his human finally accepts him for all that he is.

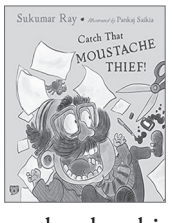
The picture book with bright hues of colour yellow, purple and green is catchy. The use of the same colours brings a continuity in the book, and yet, the placement of text at a different position on every page grabs the attention of its young readers. With one or two simple lines per page, the book conveys that identity must not be defined by the expectations of society. Richa Jha and Neeti Banerji through *Duster* discuss the pressure that people face to fit into straitjacket categories, be it of gender, sexuality or personality. Duster points to the dilemma and ridicule experienced by them when they fail to choose one category and display fluidity. From early on in life, children are taught to behave as per norms, rules and regulations set for them. They are bullied if they divert from these norms. They may change themselves to fit into the norms but at the core they are who they are—just like Duster. For his human, Duster tries to do all the dog things—wagging his tail, fetching a ball and so on, but goes back to being his real self soon.

The detailing of the book in the characters, like the cat peeping from a corner as if judging the relationship of human and Duster, the cat also being the benchmark for the comparison of Duster; photo albums and photos to depict the urge of human to capture all possible beautiful moments with Duster and, help books on taming a dog… show us the nuances of their relationship.

You cannot make everyone, but yourself happy. The world becomes a better place to be in when everyone focuses on their wellbeing without the burden of adherence to strict norms of being. This book is a starter to understanding this thought. It appears that character names Duster and Buster signify how one can change the lens of one's vision by transcending cut-out societal roles and bust thoughts that bind them. This world needs to accept all regardless of origin, faith and beliefs. With this book, children learn inclusion of all, inclusion for all. It leaves the reader with the question whether Duster is really a dog or a cat? And is Buster a dog or a tiger?

It is a thought-provoking book meant for all age groups but the sooner one reads this book, the better.

Book News ***Book News***



Catch that Moustache Thief, by Sukumar Ray, illustrated by Pankaj Saika and translated from Bengali by Sudeshna Shome Ghosh, is hilarious and iconic Bengali nonsense poem. Gonph Churi appears in a brand new form in this translation with witty and comic illustrations by Pankaj Saikia that will have readers laughing…and wondering: can anyone steal a moustache?

Talking Cub, an imprint of Speaking Tiger, 2022, pp. 18, ₹ 250.00

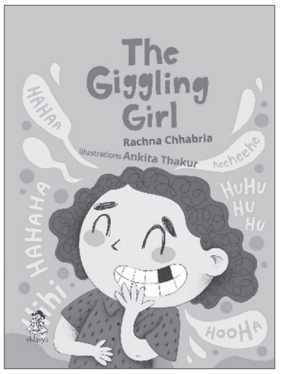
Book News ***Book News***

Das Mashhoor Bhartiya Vaigyanik is a set of 10 cards, each with a brief biographical introduction to an eminent woman scientist from India.

Eklavya, 2022, ₹ 60.00

Shivani Taneja

THE GIGGLING GIRL
By Rachna Chhabria. Illustrations: Ankita Thakur
Eklavya, 2022, pp. 32 ₹ 135.00



In the first read, *The Giggling Girl* felt like a simple story with 6-year-old Gargi giggling through various happenings around her, through the seasons, through the year. Over a day or two, the story stayed and kept gnawing at me. I wondered if these giggles could or should be taken so innocently. I decided to take the story to a group of children who were in the age of 7 to 12 years old and see their response. Was it the adult teacher in me who had a problem, or were children taking in the sheer enjoyment of the harmless mishaps along with Gargi?

As I translated and shared the story in Hindi, they were amused with the idea of a girl doing 'khee-khee' all the time. A happy girl, a girl who laughs, a giggling child is a good and important idea. But as we moved page by page, the children were not amused by the elements that made Gargi giggle. They were upset that a child was ridiculing a scared younger sibling, and felt that they would have gone to protect the baby who had hidden from the pressure cooker's whistle. 'He could have gotten hurt.' 'Spectacles cost money and my grandfather would have beaten me if I laughed.' When asked which parts of the story they liked, without articulating it as such, it was clear that an accident which would have occurred by fluke without a human being responsible for it or where there was no real impact, however insignificant, were what the children enjoyed most.

The discussion turned to the question of 'what makes us giggle', and the children threw up varied situations, all heart-warming. The saving grace of the story is Gargi's response when she herself is at the receiving end and becomes the butt of the joke. The treatment of this is also incomplete, though, as that is where the story ends.

Ankita Thakur's illustrations are animation-like: big characters, squiggles, dashes and dots. The missing tooth in Gargi's face uniquely adds a flavour to the child character and appeals to all. Her simple use of the primary four colours gives a feel of the Dr. Seuss books. But perhaps for the sake of simplicity, we have risked oversimplifying: we find different women characters in similar red polka dotted attire.

Rachna Chhabria, the author, has been writing for children for a considerable period of time. Her writings have adopted various genres, and the month of August itself sees three of her books finding their way out: *50 Great Indians* (Rupa), *Buddy The Scavage* (Zero Degree) and the current book under review, *The Giggling Girl* (Eklavya).

In the genre of children's literature, we have successfully, and with great effort, expanded our horizons from the world of animals and fantasy to bring in human characters into our stories. And so, while many books are based on generic characters, probably for a broader appeal and with an eye on highlighting the universality of emotions, I fear that we may lose authenticity on occasions. In this story, it is difficult to understand where Gargi is located. Outside of it being a snow-laden village, one where rangoli is laid out, we aren't really given a sense of anything specific about her context.

This leads us to the final question of editing and publishing. This job is as critical as any other. Eklavya may have decided to publish this story for a couple of reasons; it's simplicity in writing and in the plot, which we understand are necessary but perhaps not sufficient criteria. While we all agree that stories don't need to have 'lessons', many do send a message inadvertently. Taking lightly the many events that unfold in life could be one of the talking points of the story, which a sensitive educator would bring up regardless; but without trusting to that, empathy should have been the determining factor in this selection.

Anu Gupta

SAVING LITTLE ANT; (NANHI CHEENTI BACH GAYI)
By Shruti Rao. Illustrations: Saurabh Pandey
Children's Book Trust, 2021, pp. 16, ₹ 60.00

Every year, as I see the big black ants in my kitchen and garden, it is a signal that it is going to rain. I feel happy about the heralding monsoon. I enjoy watching them walking silently one behind the other gathering food or dragging a dead insect from one place to another. At the same time, I shudder at the thought of scores of them gathering on my kitchen platform. Memories also flood back of my little two-year old daughter being stung by one as she innocently sat on the platform watching and helping me make *rotis*. Now, as I flip through *Saving the Ant* and *Nanhi Cheenti Bach Gai* (its Hindi translation), I am touched by a five-year old girl enjoying nature and helping save a little ant from drowning in a puddle of water.

The story is about how the little girl finds pleasure in walking through a freshly rain-washed park. She enjoys the water-drops fall on her head as she walks under a tree, jumps in puddles of water, and floats paper-boats in a stream. She suddenly notices a helpless ant about to drown in the puddle of water and decides to save it. Many questions rush through her mind about how the ant could have reached there, can it swim, will it drown? She talks to the ant guiding her to swim to a dry place. She gets anxious when the ant is unable to come out and thinks of ways of getting it out. She thinks may be the ant could be taken out by her finger but is scared it may get hurt. She then thinks it could climb on the paper-boat, but the boat is wet. She then notices a big leaf with the help of which she helps the ant out. The ant not only comes out but crawls up her arm and she enjoys the tickling sensations it evokes.

In this short story for 3- to 5-year-olds, the author has chosen an issue which children of this age group are interested in, the life of insects. She has brought out a range of emotions experienced by a child—joy, curiosity, sadness, anxiety, fear, relief and a tinge of humour. The empathy she displays for the ant is brought out in a simple and subtle way. The book has won second prize in the category Social-Emotional Learning for 3- to 5-year-olds in a competition for Writers of Children's Books organized by CBT. However, what is surprising is that the child doesn't experience any fear of the ant stinging her or feel aversion, when it is crawling up her arm. Though many children are fearless about insects, a few

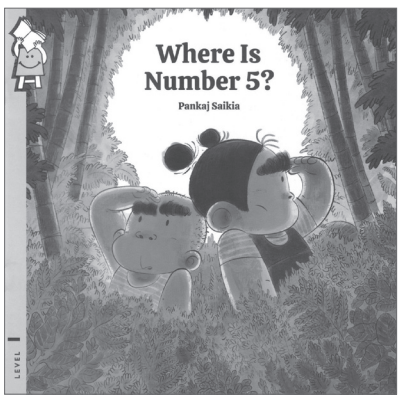
could be normally scared. Moreover, the story ends too soon. There could have been more twists and turns where the little girl could have experimented with other objects to help the ant out. Of course, one can view this differently too. It gives the parent, teacher or person reading out the book an opportunity to ask children what they would have done to save the ant from drowning.

The illustrations are interesting in terms of the relationship between the girl and the ant. While some expressions of the girl match the content, many do not. For instance, on page 3, the child's eyes are closed, and her hands are extended above her head, which seems a more adult-like posture. Similarly, on page 5, her eyes, lips and body posture do not express the delight she is experiencing jumping in a water puddle. While the illustration on page 6 does portray the girl thinking and worried and the ant seeking help, the expression of fear is absent on page 9. What I did find amusing is the squirrel watching the girl all the time, curious to know what the girl is up to. Although the story is relevant to children of all socio-economic groups, the illustrations reflect a more urban, upper middle-class group.

I feel the book can be useful for a parent or pre-school teacher to discuss children's experiences with insects, birds and animals and promote empathy.

Deepali Shukla

WHERE IS NUMBER 5?
By Pankaj Saikia
Pratham Books, 2022, pp. 16, ₹ 45.00



The title of the book is interesting in the sense that it gives you a chance to guess who is Number 5. Is it an animal? A bird? The illustration of little children on the cover page and their expressions tell us that they are looking for something. The trees around them suggest that they are in a forest. It seems obvious that they must be searching for something that is their own, e.g., a pet animal.

This book is for beginner readers. Hence the storyline and the pictures both play an important role in connecting the reader to the story. If we view the story from this standpoint, it reveals the secret of who 5 is at the start. However, there is still ample scope to wonder where 5 is. Two of the characters go to different animals in search for 5. There are feathers in the illustrations that work as clues to help them in their quest.

The illustrations in the book present a view of rural life. The depiction of the bamboo hen-house is very beautiful. It gives a glimpse of village houses is Assam and their ambience to the reader. The farms and forests are all drenched in sunlight. However, the human figures appear more like cartoon characters. I wonder if the illustrator assumed that since children like to watch cartoons on television, they may like similar rendition of human figures in the book too. Had the human figures too been realistic, like the rest of the illustrations, it would have worked better.

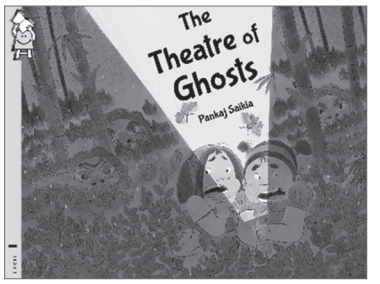
One of the strengths of the book is the dynamism in the illustrations. You can see emotions like fear, happiness, anxiety expressed through the lines in the images. You can see the sun rising and then gradually turning dark. The thick bamboo groves too are attractive! Even if the book had no text, children can engage with the images and create their own stories. The illustrations also give a clue as to who could 5 be, in the form of red feathers surrounding all the characters throughout the book–from the pigsty, to hen-house, to the forest, and even in the spider's cobwebs!

As the book is for emergent readers, and the text and illustrations provide a lot of footholds to engage, imagine and guess the story ahead. it is important to underscore the effort that needs to be put into making such books to be engaging for the reader. Repetitive words or phrases are also important in stories meant for this stage.

However, one is left with a feeling of want. The entire story—plot, characterization, treatment, could have been much better. It leaves the reader with a sense of incompleteness.

Ritika Gour

THE THEATRE OF GHOSTS
By Pankaj Saikia
Pratham Books, 2022, pp. 20, ₹ 50.00



A bunch of children who are travelling to see a performance are the focus of the narrative in Pankaj Saikia's *The Theatre of Ghosts*. It starts with two young girls leaving their house with their pet dog. The girls and their dog think they glimpse a ghost on their route and are scared by it. Later on, we discover that the ghost was only a little child wearing a mask. He takes off his mask and starts making fun of the girls. The same thing happens once again. All of the children eventually make their entrance with torches in a bamboo grove.

The premise of this short wordless story is undoubtedly intriguing in many ways. The narrative also explores fear of darkness and shadows. The boys become frightened by the shadows and noises when the children pass through the bamboo grove. They wait until they can identify the source of the sound and on finding out that it is only humans and not ghosts, they are reassured, and then they follow the girls and the dog. They feel more at ease with ghost masks and the dark later in the narrative when the kids assist the performers in getting ready for the show and then watch the play.

It's also vital to consider how the pet puppy interacts with the children. The depiction of the dog's responses to the events taking place around him are really human-like. The dog reacts like the children when they see the ghost mask and get alarmed. The story attempts to bring out the significance of our canine companions in this part of the narrative.

The story also challenges gender prejudices in society, like the belief that males are powerful and protect women whereas women are scared easily.

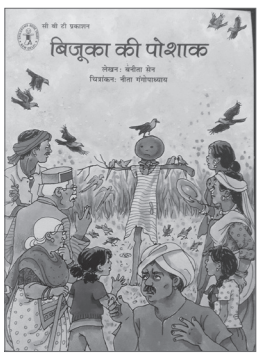
It can be quite challenging to develop the characters while writing a wordless narrative. This story deals with this challenge well, and character arcs may be seen in the narrative. The common thread that

runs through all of our characters' journeys is a fear of the dark and the unknown, which they all manage to get over by the conclusion of the narrative.

The usage of the colour blue and its many tones cultivate a sensitive and liberating environment. The title of the story is exciting for readers since it grabs their attention. Both adults and young readers will find the story engaging. It can also support the development of interpreting stories through images in the very young readers.

Nidhi Gaur

BIJUKA KI POSHAK
By Benita Sen. Illustrations: Neeta Gangopadhyaya
Children's Book Trust, 2022, pp. 20, ₹ 60.00



This picture book tells a village story about a kind, prosperous family that helps a farmer protect his harvest by making a scarecrow. Bhola, a farmer, approaches the grandfather of the family he sells his harvest to every year. He cries out for help to prevent the crows from eating the harvest. How can crows ruin the crop? From grandfather to grandson, every family member marches up to Bhola's farm to investigate the matter.

The picture book depicts a scenic village in which people harmoniously coexist. Thus, it remains faithful to the conventional notion of a village with a flat and unreal depiction. The plot of the story offered an opportunity to introduce children to life in a village, relationships between people, and between nature and people. Instead, one sees a trivialization of the problems peasants are facing today. Are crows really the biggest threat to peasants today? The story depicts a patronizing relationship between the rich family and the farmer. It is difficult to believe that a farmer is unable to make a convincing scarecrow.

The characters in the story are simplified versions of real-life people. They have no shades or any contours of a layered self. They don't have a caste, or a religion. The rich family is presented as an ideal family. This idealism makes the story's characters superficial and unreal.

The child in the story is a narrator who is writing about his grandfather's kindness. Instead of a farmer crying out for help, could this story be about children taking the initiative to make a scarecrow for the farmer? The plot offers an opportunity to use children's inherent nature to explore, and to construct, but the writer misses it.

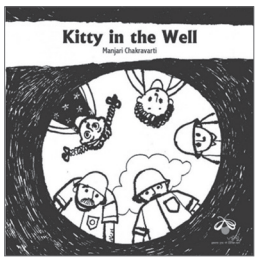
There is a need to have more depictions of children as active, intelligent, sensitive, and compassionate beings in children's literature. Children who are curious, unafraid to explore and play with their environment by manipulating and experimenting with ideas and materials must find space in literature.

The story makes one think about the various aspects of village life that could be depicted in children's literature. How can the descriptions of landscape and lifestyle enrich the story and add to its depth? How can characters and occupations be described to give a peek into everyday village life?

This picture book has an appealing page layout. It gives enough space to the illustrations. Besides one small detail about the gender of the grandchild, which does not match with the text, the illustrations are beautiful and colourful. They add to the reader's experience of the text.

Indu Nair

KITTY IN THE WELL; KUEN MEIN BILLI
By Manjari Chakravarti. Translated into Hindi from the original English by Shashi Sablok
Jugnoo, 2021, pp. 24, ₹ 50.00



The cover of this book invites you to look deep. It feels as if you are standing in a well and looking above at all the people standing there! The people—young and old—are all staring down at you with surprise.

The story revolves around a cat, but along with the cat, humans play an important role in it. One also gets a glimpse of shared concerns. The story also takes you to visit a village in rural Bengal with its tree groves and a well nearby. And everybody is nurtured around the well. Everybody shares a bond of affection with each other and this is woven very beautifully in the tapestry of the story.

While reading the story, I was transported to my own village in Kerala where we too had a well in the courtyard. One day a dog fell into the well and my brother quickly climbed down the stairs along the inner wall of the well to rescue him. The dog was rescued and from then onwards my grandmother started to keep the well covered with a wire mesh to save any animal or bird from falling in.

In this story too, when the cat falls in the well, everyone wants to rescue it. But the cat, of course has other cat-like thoughts!

The illustrations in this tiny book meant for beginner readers are not coloured, but they have an amazing power which grab your attention. The author-cum-illustrator has created a magical combination of words and images that enhances the mood of the story. The original English story has also been translated into Hindi by Shashi Sablok. The Hindi translation is simple and has a rhythm of its own. The book will be a delightful read for the beginners.

Teji Grover

AMMA
Concept by Sushil Shukla. Artwork by Kavita Singh Kale
Jugnoo, 2022, pp. 20, ₹ 60.00

Let's begin by saying that the idea of this book is a 'found' one and that the content highlights one of the most common experiences of childhood. Almost all of us have childhood memories of being lost in a *mela*: letting go of a parent's hand and running after one or another compelling game or toy can cost a child

dear. The idea of the book came, apparently, from a line from one of Garcia Marquez' texts: 'Did you happen to see a mother who is not accompanied by a child like me?' And then began the journey that had more than one person coming up with ideas of 'doing' the book. Having spoken to the team, I realized that Shashi Sablok came up with a priceless suggestion of using, on most pages, the word 'Amma', at times, in the form of a long drawn out calling aloud for mother.

The conceptualization of this gem of a book speaks volumes for collaborative ventures that are becoming far more common than they used to be. Kavita Singh Kale, who is also an animator, brings all her skills to bear on fleshing out the thin story line with her brilliantly conceived illustrations in black, white and red. The impression created with minimal colours creating a baffling range of figures is so rich that the book becomes a guessing game for readers who are breathlessly trying to locate the lost mother along with the bewildered child in the story.

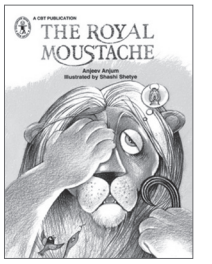
Exploring the book with a six-year old I was literally hurled into a reading that was far from linear. My fellow reader would go back several pages to check out for herself how the mela was laid out, what all was selling there, and how the anxiety of losing sight of his mother puts the myriad distractions of the mela insignificant for the protagonist. She also wondered why at several places the boy towers over the entire mela making every other sight look small. The desperation with which the boy checks out each and every corner, is depicted, or summed up, on two facing pages with vertical and parallel lines that hold the fragmented image of the child and his perplexed, anxious and searching gaze. My six-year-old fellow reader connected this visual conundrum to the tent in the mela that displayed an abundance of strategically placed mirrors.

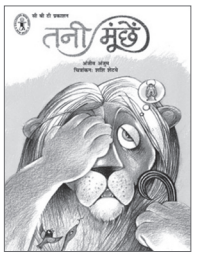
The readers get so involved in seeing the mother and child united that they explore each and every nook and cranny of a mela that speaks of our shared childhood memories. The artist dedicates the book to Marquez and tells us on the back cover that she has tried to recreate the ambience of the mela from her visits to melas of Himachal Pradesh with her grandmother. The book is extraordinarily rich in visual detail making the reader weave the story for herself. The woman cop blowing the whistle is so overwhelmed by the child's Marquezian utterance that she leads him to the announcement desk. The reader is finally able to locate the mother in the distance allaying the reader's anxiety. The numerous readings of the book with minimum words will offer endless parallel stories.

Rina Goel

THE ROYAL MOUSTACHE: (TANI MOOCHEIN)
By Anjeev Anjum. Illustrations: Shashi Shetye
Children's Book Trust, 2022, pp. 16, ₹ 60.00

Anjeev Anjum spins an endearing story about a copycat Lion, King of the Jungle, who wishes to assert his lordship over his subjects in the jungle just like the King of the land does over his subjects. Using a simple linear narrative and an immediate sense of communication, Anjum conveys a complex life lesson in a way that is easily understood by young and old alike.





The lion's moustache—as an unlikely 'protagonist'—is a simple device that is rather cleverly used as it is both humorous and significant at the same time. Anjum won the second prize in the competition for writers of children's books organized by Children's Book Trust, and one can easily see why!

This lovely book takes on a lighter, mischievous flavour with fine illustrations by Shashi Shetye. It is further evidence of the skill and temperament of the writer and the illustrator, in creating a world that encourages an immediate suspension of disbelief while leaving behind a clear message of the follies of being a copycat.

This slim book should find its way into the homes, schools, and libraries meant for young children.

Asha Sharma

HAPPY AS A HEN
By Reena I Puri. Illustrations: Aratrika Choudhury
Pratham Books, 2022, pp. 22, ₹ 60.00

HARU
Written and illustrated by: Manjari Chakravarti
Pratham Books, 2022, pp. 15, ₹ 60.00

Alien visit, suspense, adventure and some life lessons… a cracker of a book that will enthral any youngster!

The names of the characters in this beautifully illustrated, colourful book are as catchy as the story. Ma-Cluck and K-Chick are visiting Earth from their Galaxy 'Scrambled'. They travel on spaceship 'YOLK' and are on a mission to check out first-hand that the Earth Hens are a happy lot. They meet Ra Ra Rooster who tells them about his own ordinary life and shows them around.

Then comes the action when they sneak into a poultry farm under the impression that they will find absolute happiness, only to realize the sad state of the chicks there. What happens next is a great escape with Ma-Cluck using her superpowers to rescue the poor chicks, and taking them back home to Planet Egx!

A cute little picture book about a goat named 'Haru', the illustrations in the book are delightful and life-like and the text is minimal, thus catering to children in the early independent-reader category.

The simple story is about the life of Haru and how each day is different: some easy and joyful, others difficult and stressful. The story demonstrates that love and compassion are enough for anyone to lead a happy life!

Both these books are published by Pratham Books, an organization that publishes books in multiple Indian languages to encourage reading among children, and is one of the U.S. Library of Congress Literacy Award Winners for 2020.

On Big Books

By Shailaja Menon

Let us talk about what big books are. These are large picture-books designed to be shared with young readers by adults around them. By and large they are for pre-primary and primary aged children who are just beginning to enter the world of written texts.

How do we use big books? The recommended format is to conduct 'shared reading' with children. Don Holdaway developed the Shared Reading technique in New Zealand in the 1960s (Holdaway, 1979; Park, 1982), to help young readers enter and enjoy their early encounters with books. During shared reading, the teacher holds the big book up and shares it with the children while pointing along word by word using her finger or a pointer. The children are encouraged to look at the book being held up, and join in with the teacher at any point that they feel comfortable. So, the teacher does most of the reading aloud, but the reading is shared with the children. The teacher usually reads one Big Book multiple times (across several days) with her class, so that even children who were less able to join in during earlier readings, are able to participate more in subsequent readings of the book.

Now why do we need to share books in this manner with young children? Why should we have these very large books with big pictures and the large fonts and the teacher tracking along and asking the children to join it? The reason is that when children are coming to pre-primary or primary school, they already have oral language, they already are users of oral language. But many of them do not yet know how to read and write, they do not understand how to navigate the world of texts and of print. These big books then act as a bridge from the world of orality to the world of literacy. And when children are invited to read along with the teacher, the burden of decoding the script is not on the children. The teacher takes the primary responsibility for reading. And children are free to either just listen to the teacher or to call out the words or phrases that they may remember, or to predict from the pictures. In effect, there is no burden on the young children to actually read by themselves, yet, they are able to participate in, and enjoy a shared reading experience. In this way by using a big book, children learn a lot about the world of text, the world of literacy, how books work, etc.

If the teacher is doing most of the reading, then what do the children learn from such an experience? The most important thing to remember about Shared Reading is that it introduces young children to the *pleasure* and *relevance* of reading. This is especially important in countries like India, where most young children come from homes where adults have not read aloud to them. If you give books to young children, you will see that they start telling the story from the pictures in the books. Young children who cannot yet decode the print often rely exclusively on the pictures to make sense of what is going on in the book. Even though they cannot yet independently decode, they understand that texts carry meaning. This is one kind of learning we introduce children to through shared reading experiences. Children also get exposure to wonderful stories and poems and begin their journey as readers. As they participate in the shared experiences, children begin to see themselves as readers, and develop identities as readers.

We can also use Big Books to introduce young children to 'Concepts about Print' (Clay, 2000), about how print functions. For example, when we point along the words and conduct a shared reading experience with children, they may notice that the meaning of the text is coming from both: the pictures and from little squiggly shapes which may be placed under the picture or over the picture or by the side of the picture—even though they may not know what these mean. They see that it is the squiggly shapes that the teacher is pointing to, they realize that the teacher is attending to these shapes and they start attending to these shapes too. And then they realize, the words are coming from the shapes and the shapes have meaning. That's when they start realizing that the print has meaning. They also learn other things about how print functions. For example, its directionality. Either it moves from left to right, or right to left; and it typically moves from up to down. By following along with the teacher, children learn the directionality of the print that they are learning to read. They also learn how to hold a book, they learn that every page has to be turned one by one in sequence, and not haphazardly. If you look at how very young children handle books, they may open a page to the middle of the book, then come back to some other page, then skip five pages and so on. It is only through shared book experiences with adults or older children that they realize how books must be handled to reveal their meaning. Slowly, they understand that books have a correct orientation. There is a front cover, there is a back cover. 'You have to turn the book page by page. You have to look at these shapes and at the picture to make sense of it.'

Later, they may notice particular shapes within the print that seems to direct the adult's pace or expression or reading. And with the help and support of adults, they may realize: the teacher pauses when she sees this mark. That's a full stop! Then, there is another kind of shape where the teacher raises her voice like she is asking a question. That's a question mark! Sometimes the teacher speaks in a very excited or loud voice. There is an exclamation mark. Slowly, they start attending to the finer aspects like punctuation marks, capitals and so on and so forth, depending on the kind of print or script. They also learn about the spaces in between… because when we speak in the oral language, we speak in entire phrases. We don't stop after every word. But in the world of print, there is a pause after every word, because there is a gap and the children learn about these gaps and the role that they play by watching the teacher track along.

Many of these capabilities can also be built through good Read Alouds, where teachers read aloud high quality books to children. The main difference between a Read Aloud and a Shared Reading, is that in the former, the teacher reads out the book; and the children listen and respond to questions and discussions. During Shared Reading, the children themselves are invited to read along with the teacher to the extent that they can.

It is also important here to talk about certain characteristics that good big books have. Remember that big books are being used to help children to bridge from oral worlds to the written worlds. Therefore, it is very important that they have large pictures in these books. It cannot be books without pictures, because young children rely largely on the pictures to make sense of the story. So the pictures should be able to convey a lot of meaning about the text.

Then, the fonts need to be large and the layout needs to be easy to follow, so that the young readers can follow along when the teachers are pointing (at the text). There should be a limited quantity (a few lines) of text per page. Remember that young children cannot yet read the print that the teacher is reading. They rely initially on their oral memory to join in the reading. Therefore, the text needs to be sensitive to the needs of relying on oral memory. This means the text should have a predictable, memorable pattern and should ideally be rhythmic, repetitive and fun for the readers! If the storyline is very complicated, or if every line has a different structure to it, the child

will never be able to chant along with the teacher. But if there is repeated, highly patterned text, children will be able to predict, and read along purely from oral memory. For example, there is this book published by Eklavya, called *Shaljam*. It is an adaptation of a folktale translated into Hindi. An old man plants a turnip. A turnip that is too large for him to pull out. The text is rhythmic: …*budhe ne shaljam ko kheencha, pura jor lagakar kheencha, magar shaljam nikal na paya. Fir usne budhiya ko bulaya.* The teacher can pause and ask the children, 'Do you think the *budhiya* can pull?' The text continues, *Budhiya ne thama budhe ko, budhe ne thama shaljam ko. Dono ne usko mil kar kheencha, pura jor lagakar kheencha. Magar shaljam nikal na paya.* And in each page, one more character joins to '*kheencho*' the '*shaljam*'. Each time, the sentence structure is kept the same. The new person will '*thamo*' the old person and each character will be named, until *budhe ne thama shaljam ko. Sabne usko milkar kheencha. Pura jor lagakar kheencha*. *Magar shaljam nikal na paya.* This kind of repetitive, memorable, text helps children predict what is coming next. Even if they cannot read the print, based on their oral memory and from their experiences with rhyme and songs, they are able to join in.

There is a myth that if you take any good children's book and produce it in a very large form, it becomes a big book. But as I have just explained, big books are a bridge from oral language to written language for the young children. So any interesting storybook that does not have a repetitive, predictable, memorable storyline, does not have an easy layout, does not have very good picture clues, will not serve as a good big book.

There is one last point that we have to remember about big books. Big Books are not meant to teach children to decode the script. They are wonderful ways to invite children to get curious about the written world of texts, help them participate in meaningful reading experiences with trusted adults, help build oral language and assist in acquiring various emergent literacy skills. This has a particular salience in all low-literacy settings.

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Cards as a Reading Resource

By Manjiri Nimbkar

Thirteen years ago, a friend brought to my attention a series of reading cards published by Pratham. 'You must have these in your school library,' he had insisted and proceeded to procure them for us. I must admit that I was not greatly impressed with these cards, or I should say, the idea of reading cards. I am an avid reader of both fiction and non-fiction and wrinkled my nose at the cards as a substitute for books. Over the years, I came across more cards—both fiction and non-fiction—brought out by Eklavya, Ektara, Room to Read and Kaja Kaja Maru. By now I had started taking this reading resource more seriously and last year, we at Pragat Shikshan Sanstha (PSS) also brought out a set of 40 story and poem cards.

From a publisher's point of view, bringing out a book is so much more tedious and time and energy consuming as compared to bringing out a bunch of cards. A book needs more thought to illustrations, layout and designing, and pricing. Cards too can be designed very creatively like *Kya Baat Ho Gayee* by Eklavya. It is a 12-page folding card (or as Eklavya would call it, an accordion book) of a poem with 5 stanzas. The form of a card is used most innovatively here, and the line between a book and a card becomes rather hazy.

The cards can come in all sizes—from a post card to an A3 size. A card carries its own theme. I have seen story cards, poem cards—some with just four lines (a quatrain) and a big picture, cards giving geographical, historical, and scientific information and activity cards like paper folding or toy making. Cards can be graded age-, theme-, or activity-wise, colour coded or numbered depending upon their expected use. The paper used is usually thicker than that of a book. And hence, the chances of its folding or fraying are less. They are usually laminated to give more sturdiness, and their use or handling is such that its life is longer than that of a book.

Recently I came across cards containing children's writings selected from *Chakmak* magazine by Eklavya. Pragat Shikshan Sanstha too brought out cards having children's writings curated from *Navneet*, its annual publication entirely dedicated to children's works—stories, poems, articles, drawings and much more. Given that the objective of this publication is to provide a platform for expression to the children studying at PSS, the task of bringing out a book, with selected writings would be both difficult (for the volume of selectable writings might not be as much as required) and contradictory to the intent of *Navneet.*

The very limitation of a card can be its strength. Non-fiction like an encyclopaedia of geography is costly and contains the whole panorama of geographical information. A primary school child is not likely to want or read most of it. A bunch of cards, on the other hand, has most of the information about the topics covered in a primary school syllabus.

Many young libraries have a small budget but a large number of children to cater to. Cards provide for an efficient solution in such cases—as a whole bunch of cards can be purchased in a budget that will buy only half the number of good books. With cards, each child in a class of 40 can have her/his own reading resource in hand.

Now, why did I initially feel that reading cards were a poor substitute for story books? Well, a book offers many possibilities for wondering, thinking, problem solving, predicting, and imagining. One of the reasons this happens is because of the nature of the layout. It is arranged in such a way that it asks the reader to turn to the next page for an answer. A book has much more space for elaborating a theme through pictures and can unfold different things for different readers. A book expects a deeper and longer engagement.

However, at an early stage, it is more important to make reading material available to readers, in quantities. The choice is to be left to the reader.

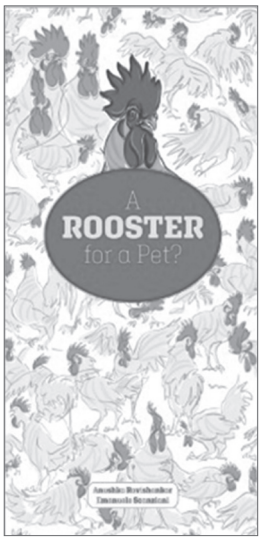
Book News ***Book News***

The Mouse and the Pencil by V. Suteyev with its animated illustrations and a predictable storyline comes with a funny twist in the end! Now as a big book, it has the potential to bring joy to many classrooms and libraries.

Eklavya, 2022, pp. 12, ₹ 220.00

TCA Avni

A ROOSTER FOR A PET
By Anushka Ravishankar. Illustrations: Emanuele Scanziani
Children's Book Trust, 2022, pp. 36, ₹ 60.00



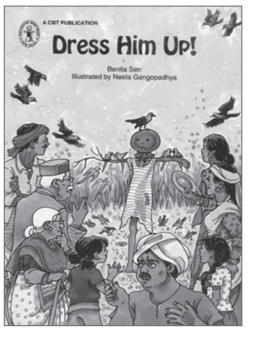
A richly illustrated children's book written in simple, rhyming verses, *A Rooster for a Pet* is about a rambunctious rooster who turns the life of the author upside down. Bought by the author's father, the cuddly ball of fluff soon grows to be a menace in the household, fluttering about the house, getting onto furniture and appliances, toppling utensils, stealing food, harassing the family cat, and generally being a boisterous pest, resulting in the parents muttering about dire consequences (Mommy says we'll take him to the park and let him go; Daddy says we'll give him off to the chick-chop shop; oh no). What stands out in the book are the quality of the illustrations, which are so good that the text is almost infructuous. Lively and expressive, they truly bring the book to life.

While the verses are written in a comic style, and would be engaging for young readers, I am not entirely comfortable with the messages the book conveys as it feeds into many of my personal pet peeves. The story, which is really an illustration of 'buy in haste, repent at leisure', is particularly normalizing of impulsively buying an animal which looks cute when young but is uncontrollable when older (especially since the owners are not able or willing to train it), resulting in owners abandoning an animal which is no longer capable of surviving on its own anymore. An unfortunately common pattern amongst many first-time pet owners, the book is visibly cavalier in its treatment of an acknowledged family pet, especially in its conclusion, where the children are seen putting up posters for its adoption. While the book will probably be highly successful with children, especially, due to the vivid, delightful and detailed illustrations, I am not sure it is a book I would buy for my own nephews and nieces, especially in today's age when the quality of children's books has improved so markedly.

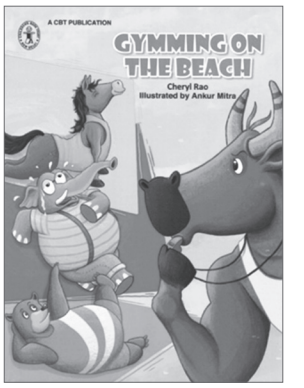
Ranjana Kaul

DRESS HIM UP!
By Benita Sen. Illustrations: Neeta Gangopadhyaya
Children's Book Trust, 2022, pp. 16, ₹ 60.00

GYMMING ON THE BEACH
By Cheryl Rao. Illustrations: Ankur Mitra
Children's Book Trust, 2022, pp. 16, ₹ 60.00



Reading aloud is one of the earliest means by which we share stories with young children and try to inculcate the habit of reading in them. Hearing a story which captures the imagination, provides enjoyment and introduces different emotions and situations and also creates a connection between the adult and the child being read to. *Dress Him Up!* and *Gymming on the Beach* published by CBT are two read aloud books with beautiful illustrations which would capture the attention of any young reader. The first of these which won the first prize in this category is written by Benita Sen and is peopled by grandparents, friends and family, all of whom come together to try and solve a simple but significant problem for their neighbour Bhola who has a small farm at the end of the village. Interestingly, at the end of the book a solution to the problem still remains to be found, a rather unusual conclusion for a children's book but one which shows that all difficulties cannot be solved at one go and that failure does not mean that one gives up making an effort. Two very important lessons which are conveyed through a very simple story.



Gymming on the Beach by Cheryl Rao is written in simple verse which would appeal to any young listener. Picking up the theme of physical fitness, it illustrates that everyone is different but these differences can be overcome by focusing on one's strengths rather than trying to be like everyone else. Both these books convey ideas in a very simple and subtle manner without losing that lightness of touch which is essential in order to engage the interest of a young listener. Using repetition, simple language and lovely illustrations, they would be welcome additions to any read-aloud library.

Manoj Nigam

TAKEY THEY DUS
Illustrations: Atanu Roy
Jugnoo, 2021, pp. 12, ₹ 50.00

टका सा जवाब देना, टके का सब खेल है, टका सा मुंह लेकर रह जाना, सौ टके की बात है—these are some of the instances where one experiences the use of the word *'taka'* or *'takey'*. Children who are immersed in the English language may not even have used or heard this word before.

This tiny-sized book may well hide among a pile of many other books, but once it becomes visible, it cannot but be noticed. And why 'were' there 10 *takas*? Where did they go? Why are there no more *takas* now? Questions zip across the minds. The book is so small that you may as well read it right away to find answers to these questions.

As you open the book, one is naturally attracted to the somewhat funny illustrations by Atanu Roy. The pictures then lead you to the folk-song *Takey They Dus*. In the song, there is a moneyed man, a *'seth ji'* who starts with ten *takas*. And as you turn the pages and the song progresses, something or the other happens, so he has to spend his *takas* one by one. The song keeps a count of the money left with a repetitive rhythmic lilt, till he has no more *takas* left!

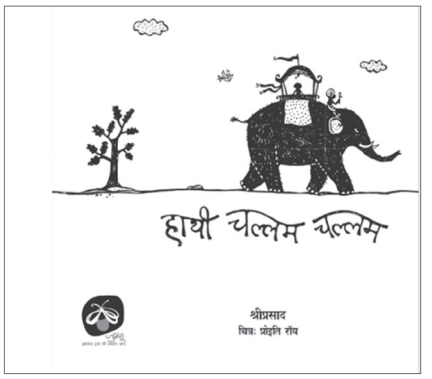
Being a folk song, it is hard to tell who may have written,

composed or sung this first. But as folk songs move from mouth to ear to mouth to ear… they keep changing. And this adaptability of folk songs keeps them forever new. The same goes for this one. Children will love it and adults too get a chance to peep into their childhood through it!

The book has immense possibilities as a learning aid—it engages children, can be used to play with language, to talk about reverse order of numbers, subtraction and so on.

Teji Grover

HATHI CHALLAM CHALLAM
By Shriprasad. Illustrations: Proiti Roy
Jugnoo, 2022, pp. 24, ₹ 50.00



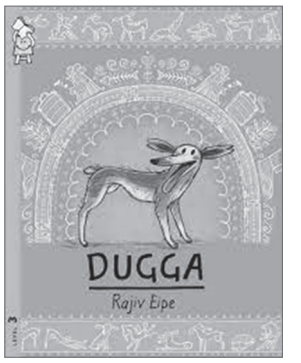
Shriprasad (1932-2012), one of the founders of children's literature in Hindi, is known for writing the most musical and rhythmic poetry for children; his entire oeuvre being a veritable feast of sounds to be enjoyed by children and adults alike. In many of his poems, there's also an element of 'nonsense' which in fact, at times, has layers of meaning and borders on the fantastic. One of his best known poems about the elephant giving a joyride to twenty children has been turned into this delightful little book with two lines of the poem occupying two pages along with Proiti Roy's black and white drawings that can be seen on both facing pages. A more conventional illustrator committed to stick to the text would not have been able to enthrall the reader with the presence of unexpected figures like a teapot, a ubiquitous snail, a participant observer in the shape of an amused sun smiling at the scene below. There are several other objects and creatures on the pages that follow that seem to add to the mesmerizing lilt of the poem. It would be more appropriate to say that the playful illustrations mimic the dynamic sound and movement of the text, making you even more aware of the music. When a short poem is spread over 20 pages, one could easily miss the overall impact, but this is what the illustrations salvage by providing, to a fragment, a visual lilt, so to speak. But, let me add, that the practice of carrying the entire poem on the last page should be followed, as has often been done by Eklavya and Ektara both.

In the original, the text has long lines and two-line stanzas. In the present publication, however, the two lines have been split into four, removing the comma in the long lines: a good strategy to be followed for the sake of young readers, though purists would frown at taking such liberties with the poem. The drawings, while illustrating the movement and body parts of the elephant, add layers of meaning to whatever the elephant is compared with. A good example is a mountain-range that showcases not only trees but also the vehicular traffic on serpentine roads. It's not surprising, therefore, that the book needs to be read over and over for the sake of the text as well the fascinating world of objects and animals or even clouds and water-bodies with aquatic creatures that all seem to be caught in the lilt. Children with whom I read the book thumbed through the pages time and again, listening to the poem as well as commenting joyfully on the pictures. The most exciting thing about the poem, however is, the coinage of words that serve as verb endings, adjectives and adverbs, but which are perfectly comprehensible in the poem. These fascinating words capture the movement of the elephant's body-parts, and the vertiginous sensations experienced by the kids during the ride.

This book is highly recommended for libraries, classrooms and individual collections.

Parul Batra Duggal

DUGGA
By Rajiv Eipe
Pratham, 2022, pp. 38, ₹ 65.00



When an author is also an illustrator, or an illustrator also writes stories, and she or he conceives a book that takes shape—then the magic that happens is what you can see in Rajiv Eipe's *Dugga*!

Dugga is a wordless picture book, or a pure picture storybook. The cover shows the image of a fox-like dog. At first glimpse it appears like any common stray dog, but on seeing carefully you are able to see what may have happened with her. However, whatever happened or happens, Dugga has a smile on her face. For an instant, the cover gives an impression of some folk art—but then you see images of Dugga emerging in its various moods and postures!

As soon as you turn into the first page of the book, the image of a familiar city opens out in front of you, and you are lost in the details of this illustration. It can be an image from any city of India where you have the railway passing by. You may have kept as pets as may Alsatians or Labradors or Pomeranians or Dalmatians, but Dugga is our very own local street dog. You may have come across many such near your house, or in crowded markets, in the street squares or near hospitals. Some of us try to drive them away with a 'Hoosh…' or a 'Hut!' But have you ever wondered what they do all day? Has anyone bothered to ever watch them through the day? Rajiv Eipe presents just such a common day in the life of a common street dog. You walk the day wth Dugga in pictures and weave the story yourself—now Dugga is doing this, now this happened with her, she went there… and you share all kinds of emotions of happiness, surprise, trouble and sadness with her. Suddenly Dugga meets with an accident. (You need to read the book to know all of the story!). Her life turns into shades of grey, as do the images. And gradually, as she regains strength, colours come back to her life–an excellent conceptualization of book design.

The book says so much without saying a word that for the first time I felt that a picture story book had as much story as it has pictures. The balance between the story and images is beautifully attained here. At places the book gives the impression of being a comic-book, but as compared to most comic-books, the expressions of Dugga and her friends are much more detailed here.

I do hope that all readers of this book will start understanding the Duggas around them better.

Peeping into a Writer's Attic

Shailaja Shrinivasan & Tultul Biswas in Conversation with Norwegian Writer Hans Sande

Shailaja Shrinivasan & Tultul Biswas: Your writing is prolific—for children, for adults and poetry. How do you keep in touch with the current generation that you write for when you write for children?

Hans Sande: Apart from the impulses I get by visiting schools and kindergartens, I have no method or measure to keep in touch with the current generation. My grandchildren are teen-agers…I simply put my trust in my own sensibility and the bittersweet memories of my childhood. Curiosity and daring are basic elements in my writing.

Q: We have only read a few of your books for children. Some emotions like curiosity, angst, frustrations, loss, grief, trauma etc., have been addressed in some of your books. How do you decide which emotions to take up?

HS: No, I do not decide which emotions to take up. Emotions come as a result of the stories, and stories come out of the blue.

Q. What in your mind is the source of the reference to god in the book *Frog*, and what is its significance?

HS: I have a strong drive to play with myths and authorities. My father was a Lutheran priest, and I am a non-believer with a deep interest in all religions. Thus, I am fully aware of the comfort and the mental pain that religious belief may cause. The frog is happy in its belief, and I am happy to play with his divine revelation.

Q. Which emotions and issues have you not touched upon as yet in your books for children?

HS: Strange question! I have written more that 40 books for children and young adults, plus numerous poems. Still I am surprised when new and unexpected themes pop up.

Q. What is your writing process? Do you observe/use lived experiences to base your stories?

HS: My writing process is in general spontaneous. I feel that the six words of Tilopa are close to my state of mind during my creative process: No plan, no intention, no effort, just let it settle…or develop, by itself!

Every morning I take a walk on a path in the nearby forest. One day this sentence popped up in my mind: 'When I came home, the horse was gone. What? Say again! When I came home, the horse was gone.' This meaningless sentence would not go away. Was I hallucinating? Ought I to contact a psychiatrist? No, Hans, just relax and enjoy! I was on the path to uncover a new story that was hiding in the claire-obscure forest of my mind. So I began pondering: Who is speaking? Obviously an elderly person, probably a man, may be a grandfather—very fond of his horse. He has been away for a long time, maybe as a prisoner of war, and when he came home, and expected that everything should get back to normal, the horse was gone. Nobody would answer his question. His peace of mind was gone. Years pass by, he is getting more and more confused, and the only one who is willing to listen, is his grandson.

The *Red Sweater* came to me in a different manner, more like a visual experience in a dreamlike state. Two vivid girls, the autumn colours, the landscape and the switch from innocence and joy to tragedy and sorrow. Maybe that is why it was natural for me to illustrate this book myself; I had already seen it all; the footprints in the sand, the happy girls running around, the secret place of cloudberries in the mountains. The name Liv means Life, and Siv means Straw or Reed, that is, reed growing in the water. Finally, the red sweater turns out to be a symbol of how Liv has to keep on living, running and growing up, while carrying the love and loss symbolized by Siv's sweater.

Q. War, loss, trauma are difficult real life situations often avoided in children's books. What is it that drives you to pick up such difficult themes in stories for children?

HS: What drives me is probably an inherited and chronic wish to find and uncover something unseen, hidden or forbidden. To reverse the question: why should I go for themes that have already been explored in hundreds of books?

Q. And how has the response of children and critics been to this?

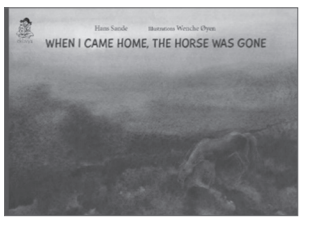
HS: In general, my books are quite popular among children and critics, and I have received many prizes. Some of my books have however met with protests and warnings. I use the term Border Patrol to describe the resistance against unconventional literature. Such Border Patrols are probably less active in Norway than in many other countries. Still, they have repeatedly been trying to stop people from reading some of my books for children. Border Patrols are motivated by the most noble intentions, and may consist of parents, teachers, librarians and critics. They may be activated when a writer is passing their borders, based on pedagogical, religious, moral or political standards. One grim example occurred when *My Dad is a Pirate* was published. The Israeli ambassador to Norway protested by writing to three Norwegian Ministers, warning them against the serious consequenses for the bilateral relations, if this book was read by children. The book deals with the water conflict and the suppression of the Palestinians.

Q. You may have interacted with children around your stories. If you have, is there any incident/question/thought that has remained with you? Would like to share some?

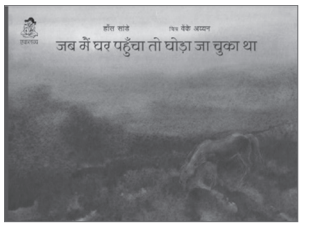
HS: Children are in general curious and open-minded. One critic attacked *The Plum Tree*, for the scary change taking place when the boy gradually grows into a tree. To children these changes appear to be intriguing and exciting fantacies. Finally, *The Plum Tree* was awarded a prestigious prize by the Ministry of Culture.

Nidhi Gulati & Shivi

WHEN I CAME HOME, THE HORSE WAS GONE
By Hans Sande. Illustrated by Wenche Oyen. Translated from the original Norwegian by Marietta Taralrud Maddrell
Eklavya, 2021, pp. 34, ₹ 135.00



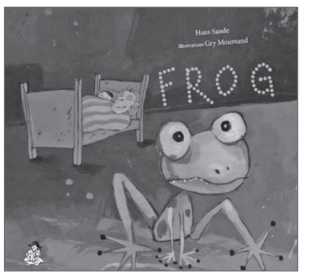
JAB MAIN GHAR PAHUNCHA TO GHODA JA CHUKA THA
By Hans Sande. Illustrated by Wenche Oyen. Translated from the English by Rustam Singh.
Eklavya, 2021, pp. 34, ₹ 100.00

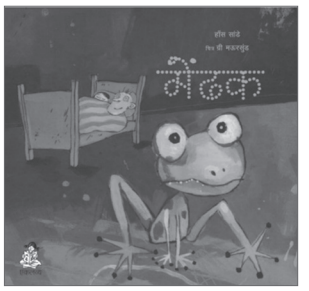


FROG
By Hans Sande. Illustrated by Gry Moursund. Translated from the original Norwegian by Marietta Taralrud Maddrell
Eklavya, 2021, pp. 31, ₹ 170.00

MAENDAK

By Hans Sande. Illustrated by Gry Moursund. Translated from the English by Teji Grover
Eklavya, 2021, pp. 31, ₹ 130.00





Norwegian poet, novelist, psychiatrist, and illustrator, Hans Sande, pens two cavernous pieces of children's literature. First, is the powerful, *When I Came Home, the Horse was Gone* and the unputdownable second, *Frog*. The texts come to us through NORLA, an initiative to promote the translation of Norwegian books and published by the Indian partner, Eklavya.

When I Came Home, the Horse was Gone is a stirring tale of war entwined with memory and trauma. Through his broad lens, Sande captures the tormenting memories which lurk long after the physical aftermaths of war are over. The story begins with a dream segment where the narrator envisions a dark and stormy night with a man roaming without protective boots or a raincoat. The segment breaks as the narrative bursts into reality, beginning with the desperate search for the narrator's grandfather. Amidst the humdrum of an eager search, the grandfather is found echoing the name of his beloved horse. As the family returns, the mother and the father display exasperation towards the grandfather's concerns. The narrator, though, remains calm. The plot progresses through the eyes of a terribly old man who thinks his grandson is his son. As both sit down, the narrator begins to reveal his grandfather's trauma through fragmented anecdotes of his younger self. He speaks of the happier times of togetherness of his grandfather and his beloved horse, Tobba, and about the hard-hitting events of war and post-war. As he talks, the delicate mesh of memories overwhelms the story. He mentions the larger political motives and benefactors of war through the subtle motif of 'king'. Grandfather's horse is gone when he returns from prison, ending the frame story. Yet again, the grandfather wants to search for the horse. As always, the grandchild comforts him.

Hans Sande crafts a parallel world in *Frog* with his subtle and poignant storyline. Parallel storylines follow a blind father and son and a frog. As the frog follows his natural life cycle, so does the father; with trajectorial differences. As the tadpole grows into a frog and hops over nature and life questions, the father-son team struggles through their everyday life. Frog life stands in direct contrast with that of the son, who mulls over life restricted and curbed by the caretaking responsibilities. Soon after, Sande fuses the narratives. The father, who the frog takes for God, holds tremendous hopes for the rain showers as requested by the frog. Rain follows and the frogs rejoice. By the end of the story, the father's delusion that he's God is satiated. The plot ends with a content frog and a son, grateful for his father's skills of storytelling. The frog and the papa become one.

The texts raise and engage with three modern existentialist questions: of God, death and trauma. The first is, 'Who is God? Is he knowable?' Habermas' claims that we live in a post-secular time, as the world is making an acceptable turn to religion (Habermas, 2008). We are witnessing a re-sacralization of society. The fervour of this phenomenon gained momentum after September 2001, where 'not even the most blithely atheistic metropolitan intellectuals would be so confident they could keep "religion" out of their lives' (Neuman, 2014). Even the secular ideologues including Pamuk, Rushdie, Atwood, Gordimer, Murakami and Coetzee have written the 'most exciting and rigorous inquiries into the legacies of the religious imagination' (ibid). Thus, religion finds its way back into literature, and with Sande, back into children's literature. The frog's existential search for God builds up to an event leading up to a perceptual shifting. God is 'perceived' by the frog, and this act is neither other-worldly nor divine; rather it is produced by the clashing of narrative frames. The frog's empirical description of God is transformatory. It is, in essence, a non-argumentative disclosure, not completely dissociated from empirical observation and rational argumentation. God is produced in an experience, not a thoughtless myth or a reputed command of a ruthless God. In Sande's universe, God is larger than logic. It is created twice; first, through the God complex of the father and second, through the recognition by the frog.

The second question deals with coming to terms with death and its appearance in children's literature. Much of children's literature is uncomfortable with the imagination of nothingness. Death is rarely engaged with, it is a mystery of the modern condition, not banal or mundane. It is whispered about, the conditions in which it arrives are described to the last-minute detail. As if such descriptions would reveal the 'secret' of death. Death, in *Frog*, arrives quietly, in the private space of the home shared by a father-son. This unfamiliar terrain of death and dying, hitherto banished from children's literature, are seen in the text. In both the books Sande gives death a symbolic representation, in the window borings made with a gimlet. He makes it evident that death is approaching and that the father's engravings are a symbol of his acknowledgment of his eventual death.

The third representation is that of the psyche. Well stirred with words and illustrations, Sande paints a world that portrays the mind before the eyes. The grandfather in *When I Came Home, the Horse was Gone* and the father in *Frog* and their respective families are grappling with post-traumatic stress disorder and schizophrenia and conversion disorder. The first book recognizes the cyclic nature of trauma and the aftermath of war *visibilized* through its catastrophic effect on the grandfather's psyche. There is a certain sense of rhythm and repetition involved in the narratives.

Repetition forms a crucial feature of writing about trauma. In *When I Came* … the grandson is quite familiar with the tale that the grandfather is going to narrate. He is aware that the old man aspires to go on the search for the horse again, a complex cycle of trauma and memory that he cannot seem to break. Through a narrative within a narrative, Sande not only writes about trauma but performs it (Vickroy, 2002). He explores the rhythm, uncertainties and incomprehensible aspects of trauma. Schönfelder (2013) acknowledges that trauma-based narratives represent how trauma refuses to be clearly remembered or retold. In both texts, that break is clearly visible in not only the writing but also the illustrations.

Frog navigates the difficult terrain of a child coping with the mental illness of the father. The child is aware of the mental illness and that his father was 'off his rocker' and thought he could talk to 'frogs and the *raatrani*'. The unending care and responsibility make the child feel trapped in circumstance and suffocated in the burden of 'ableness'. While the father's confinement is mysterious, located in the delusional trappings of the mind, the child's confinement is real. The caregiver's lived experience is mostly *invisibilized*, or glorified, couched in a vocabulary of *responsibilization*. We hear its echoes in the child's sniffles, see it in the many ways the child cleans up before and after the father 'drags him' into tales, dances, and woods. The boy seeks the 'outer world', promised to him at birth, taken away through the illness of the parent. He seeks escape to a world where there is civility, autonomy, order, and exposure imbued with endless possibilities of being and becoming. He seeks freedom from the burden of a responsibility not easily vocalized. Unable to extricate

himself from the living conditions, his tiredness is only echoed through whispers.

The illustrations in both the books are not secure locations. The reality they depict is not whole, complete, and nicely boxed in. The incompleteness and dislocation are seen in the worlds depicted, mimicking the mind-spaces of the mentally ill grandfather and father (Nyamnjoh, 2015). The illustrations depict cracks, silent tremors, and dysfunction in things the children and the traumatized see and experience, what they were dealing with, in their sociality and relationships. The illustrated universe of *When I came…* is muddled and blurry. There's rupture and delusion in the background. The lines are smudged and there is acute darkness, signalling the uncertainty that the family is a part of. In contrast, in the world that Sande paints in *Frog*, there's brilliance of colour, breaking and merging of lines and shapes as well as worlds. The world of the frog is a brighter, more hopeful side while the world of the father-son duo is a dingy, mundane depiction. When the two worlds merge, the jump is visible in the illustrations.

The two texts have been translated into Hindi to lend a wider access across North India. The Hindi translations re-create the rhythm of the narrative and its powerfulness and poignance is not lost. In *Frog*, the Norwegian/English non-sense utterance of 'Gok' is close to the word 'God'. In the translation, this is rendered as 'trr', a sound that frogs make. The symbolism of the Gok/God is lost in this rendering. The younger readers of the Hindi texts may find the context a tad bit alienating, but this creates possibilities to engage with other contexts, other worlds. Yet the human condition saddled with post-war trauma, psychiatric states and search for meaning that underlies these different stories carries echoes of their own lived worlds.

Sande's narrative is marked by slowness, deliberateness and gentleness. It brings in testimony of trauma from the point of view of the mentally ill, the war survivor and the nurturers, children in both stories. The narrative hesitations, jumps, incoherence, gaps and silences convey the predicament of a trauma narrative. The vivid/blur illustrations also display the lack of clarity and coherence. The literary style 'incorporate[s] the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of trauma within [their] consciousness and structures' (Vickroy, 2002, p. xiv), parallel narratives, multiple perspectives evoke an empathic unsettlement in readers.

The reader is better equipped to conduct socio-cultural critical analysis on the very mechanisms that cause trauma in the first place after being so affected, primed, and yet perturbed. The stories employ literary devices to arouse the reader's empathy and critical thinking. Trauma transcends the personal experience. Instead, its emphasis on societal oppression and the psychological harm it causes is poignant and remarkable. Inviting children to this messy, unresolved, unsettled world is a brave and ethical act.

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Rashmi Paliwal

MATTIE SIT DOWN! SIT DOWN MATTIE!
MATTIE BAITH JAO! BAITH JAO MATTIE!
By Indu L Harikumar
Eklavya, 2021, pp. 16, ₹ 100.00 and ₹ 75.00

A sense of plain bliss pervades every page of the book—right from the beginning—right to the end. Little delights snuggle in nooks and corners of the drawings, and you may repent if you overlooked them when you turned the page in a hurry. You should not. This happy boy, Mattie, draws the sun in the sky (in which can be seen a cricket ball) and turns to grin at the puppy who licks his feet… oh oh… a basketball basket nestles down from the cloud and oops! Is it that the happy boy was making a throw at the basket and not drawing the sun as a cricket ball—or was it all of this all at once?

He strides over from the sun to the moon, crossing huge greens and some blues in long strides and slides and climbs—riding waves of happiness and merriment and enchantment with himself and all things around.

Mattie's drawing teacher is mesmerized with the rhythm and flow in his being and doing… his incessant energy… his movements—and his spurts of engrossment to draw.

As a teacher she has the knowledge that enables her to restrain her urge to change and control Mattie out of fear of the effect on the other children of the class. As a teacher she has the skill and the aptitude to take impromptu decisions such as to use the paper rockets that Mattie makes and organize a creative project that the other children could do—they make Christmas decorations with the paper rockets and their own drawings.

As the class breaks for Christmas, gifts are exchanged. Mattie too has a gift for his drawing teacher. He has made many drawings after all! Stapled up, these he gifts to his beloved teacher. For all his state of bliss, he is not in ignorance. Seven-year-old Mattie, in command of his knowledge of himself, knowledge of the others around him, and knowledge of the exceptional quality of his teacher, finds a way to show what he values and why.

The author, bringing the book to a close, shares in the postscript her reason for writing the story of Mattie. In her own childhood she could not sit still or remain without speaking. There was a teacher who never tried to stop her. It is this that has powered her memory and her sense of why it is so important to tell such a story.

We have a huge thank you to say to Indu L Harikumar as her book records and registers the possibilities of our classrooms meeting the special needs of children. When I first read and saw the story, I was transported into the possible inner world of a 12-year-old boy who had been coming to my place to get some help with his schoolwork. I recalled my struggle with my tense feelings as this boy would shift from one thing to another, thrusting himself in the midst of the activities of others, unable to be by himself. Even more than the text, it was the pictures of Mattie that wrapped around me an aura of the world of someone special and different, who could not control himself and whom others could not control as well. Giving up the tension to control opens up the possibilities of being creative and spontaneous, of being constructive and supportive in the self-

actualization of the other person.

While Mattie's story has these great big strengths, it could also come across to us as painting a very rosy picture. As Mattie does not disturb others, things can move smoothly. What if this was not the case? How would things go? I am sure they can go well, but how? Wish we could look forward to many more stories like Mattie's that can make us inhabit the several rainbow shades that make up our lives.

The pages of *Mattie* are designed with well justified proportions of text size, text space and picture space. The illustrations subtly and superbly effuse the mood of the moment. The Hindi translation stands well on its own with the longer size of sentences thoughtfully adjusted to the design of the pages. Priced at Rs. 100/- in English and Rs. 75/- in Hindi, this 16-page book with its flawless pictures, design, and printing, is a pleasure to possess and see.

Harjinder Singh 'Laltu'

A HOUSE TO LET

By Farideh Khalatbaree. Translated from the original Persian into English by the author. Illustrations: Ali Mafahkheri

Eklavya, 2021, pp. 32, ₹ 110.00

GHAR KA SAPNA

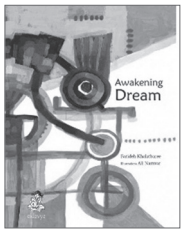
By Farideh Khalatbaree. Translated from the English into Hindi by Bharat Tripathi. Illustrations: Ali Mafahkheri

Eklavya, 2021, pp. 32, ₹ 80.00

AWAKENING DREAM

By Farideh Khalatbaree. Translated from the original Persian into English by the author. Illustrations: Ali Namvar

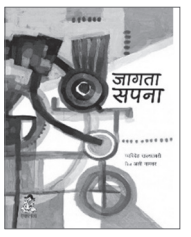
Eklavya, 2021, pp. 56, ₹ 130.00



JAGTA SAPNA

By Farideh Khalatbaree. Translated from the English into Hindi by Nidhi Saxena. Illustrations: Ali Namvar

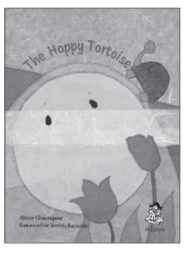
Eklavya, 2021, pp. 56, ₹ 100.00



THE HAPPY TORTOISE

By Akram Ghasempour. Translated from the original Persian into English by Farideh Khalatbaree. Illustrations: Lisa Jamileh Barjesteh

Eklavya, 2021, pp. 24, ₹ 95.00



KHUSH KHUSH KACHHUA

By Akram Ghasempour. Translated from the English into Hindi by Deepali Shukla. Illustrations: Lisa Jamileh Barjesteh

Eklavya, 2021, pp. 24, ₹ 70.00

MOON HUNTERS

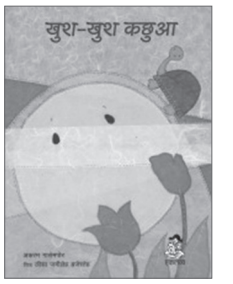
By Mohammed Reza Shams. Translated from the original Persian into English by Farideh Khalatbaree. Illustrations: Amin Hassanzadeh

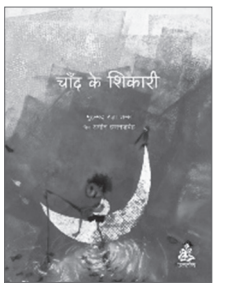
Eklavya, 2021, pp. 28, ₹ 95.00

CHAAND KE SHIKARI

By Mohammed Reza Shams. Translated from the English into Hindi by Shashi Sablok. Illustrations: Amin Hassanzadeh

Eklavya, Bhopal 2021, pp. 28, ₹ 70.00





There is a country in the Eastern end of what is known as the Mideast in the West. Iran—Persia of history and what we used to call *Faaras*, has given us wonderful works of cinema, poetry and other forms of art. Who can forget the amazing film '*Becchha-ye Aasmaan* (Children of Heaven)' by Majid Majidi! Irani imagination stands out as a unique contribution to the repository of aesthetics that the human mind has produced. The same is true of children's literature.

Like anywhere else, Iran has had its share of transformations in both writing and illustrations for children in the last hundred years. Reinterpreting the folklore, using a modern idiom, experimental genres have emerged. There is a rich collection of children's books in *Faarsi* and a number of illustrators and writers are engaged in producing books for children. Eklavya deserves praise for bringing to children in South Asia, these few glimpses into the children's writing in Iran. Due to demonization of Iran by the West, there is lack of information on what goes on there despite our vicinity. Hence, exposure of their works to our children is welcome.

These four works for children, albeit in translation, are wonderful to read to ourselves and to little children. It is likely that children will also enjoy reading these books by themselves. There are some hiccups with the text in the first of the set and, also some issues with the Hindi translations. The technical issues first—in two of the books, in the copyright page, 'Persian' is spelled wrongly in both the English and the Hindi versions; none of the books mentions the original title in Persian. The copyright pages for the Hindi translations do not mention the English translator(s) from whose work, the translation into Hindi is done. It is as if the text in English was magically made available.

A good guess for the number of individuals knowing the Persian language in the city of Bhopal, where the publisher is located, is more than ten thousand. *Faarsi* was the court language in many parts of South Asia and both the Hindi and the Urdu traditions of the *Hindustani* language use a large vocabulary borrowed from it. Many of the '*kissas*' like *Laila-Majnu* and *Shirin-Farhaad*, etc., still prevalent in North India as an oral tradition, have come to us from *Faarsi*. The inter-connections are deep and intimate. The taletellers of South Asia and Iran have learned from each other for over three thousand years, improvised and reinterpreted the texts and what we have today is civilizations that are bound to each other intricately. With this in mind, one wonders why no effort was made to find the original works for the books in hand and talk to someone knowledgeable in *Faarsi*. Taking translation so lightly is unacceptable. It does require labour and exploration in detail. Much of the historical and cultural connections between *Faarsi* and Hindi is lost when the text is processed via a European intermediary. Naturally, the flow in the Hindi texts is awkward and rather artificially constructed. For instance, '*shikari*' for the word 'hunters' does not carry the subtleties of the word '*shikar-chi*', the *Faarsi* word that is used in *Hindustani*. Or the word 'moon'—'*chaand*' in Hindi is fine, but one wonders what the word in the original work is. Is it '*Maah*'—a commonly used pretty name for many children in South Asia?

The selected books are good reading overall. Khalatbaree's *A House to Let* is a nice idea of a house dreaming of ideal tenants and

attempting to realize the dream. The hiccup here is that the 'ideal' is stereotypical, reflecting the prejudices prevalent in the larger society. It is sad that what is otherwise a beautiful imagination in both the text and illustrations is marred with such prejudiced thinking.

Khalatbaree's *Awakening Dream* is a sensitive approach to the frequent problem we all experience while growing up. Ridiculed by her peer, a little girl questions a name given to her by her affectionate grandmother and the granny takes her through a journey in imagination helping her to retrieve her emotional strength. Here she has the grandma as the eternal and universal rescuer and the story takes us back to our own experiences in childhood with our grandparents or elderly in the neighbourhood. The interesting feature of this story is that it is a mixture of the real and the imaginary. The fact that everyone has wrinkles as one ages, is fused with a journey across the wrinkles into gaining confidence and accepting one's worth. That often the formal systems of learning like schools work to destroy the confidence of a growing child is revealed obliquely in the story and thus it becomes a useful critique of schooling. The title for the Hindi version needs a rethink—should it be '*jaagta hua sapna*' or '*jagaata sapna*' instead of '*jaagta sapna*'?

Mohammed Reza Shams is a prolific writer for children and quite aptly well recognized. *Moon Hunters* is a beautiful mix of the traditional folk tales and the modern—the mermaid, the lichen and algae. The imagination of the child is contrasted with the practical nature of the adult and yet there is no real conflict. The father is worried about feeding the family, and the child is dreaming of how to catch the moon. The moon, caught in the fishing net is released into the sea for posterity to dream more of the heavens and create more stories, and art in general. The text is a good example of a job done well in bringing to a child reader the difficulties that adults experience and simultaneously provoking her to imagine creatively.

Akram Ghasempour is another recognized writer for children. In *The Happy Tortoise*, he takes the age-old tale of the hare and the tortoise and gets the tortoise to have a cart made by the woodpecker, so that it can run as fast as the rabbit. And running fast, it discovers that so much is lost in life as one speeds up. You lose your friends, small pleasures that give meaning to life. And there comes a point when you decide to jump out of the wagon and go back to the way things were—moral alright, elegant nonetheless, that children are sure to enjoy.

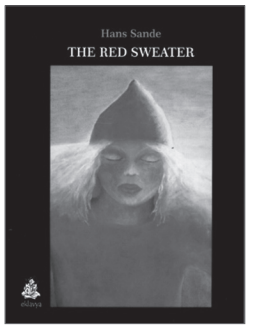
The original illustrations are retained in all four books—giving them a lot of space—and that is laudable. The imagination is local as the illustrators are from Iran, and at the same time global, since the emotions portrayed are universal. Such works bring the universality of human experiences and imagination with all the diversities of cultures and languages, to children everywhere and this is a highly desirable goal in today's challenging times when hatred percolates through any opening left unsupervised.

The font size of the text could have been larger in some instances for easy reading by children. Also, occasionally, the text overlaps the darker colours in the illustrations and this could have been avoided.

Finally, we hope that more works from the Mideast will reach our children and from translators in our languages who are sincere and willing to work hard.

Swaha Sahoo

THE RED SWEATER
By Hans Sande
Eklavya, 2021, pp. 36, ₹ 110.00



Grief and loss are never easy to talk about, more so with children. In fact, death and children feel like opposites. Children are full of life, laughter, energy and hope. Death is silent, dark, still and hopeless.

Can you write a children's book about death and not make it dark? In the hands of master storyteller Hans Sande, this is possible.

The Red Sweater is the story of two 8-year-olds, Siv and Liv—best friends with many promises between them. When Siv goes missing, Liv goes searching for her on the beach where they had built the sand castle, along the stream where they caught trout with their hands, inside Siv's room and under her bed. That night Liv dreams of Siv lying peacefully afloat. The next morning she runs to the stream, and into the marsh.

> 'We were going to run here together, to our secret cloudberry place. That was the plan.'
> In the pond she discovers Siv, lying and floating.

The narrative, written in first person, flows like water. The text is lyrical. The expressions of grief and disbelief are heavy with emotion.

> 'Why did you go there alone, Siv? Why did you go to our secret cloudberry place?'

For children death comes with many questions and no answers. As adults we want to protect children from death, from loss, from getting hurt. But we do not realize that children are already experiencing these emotions, especially if it is the death of a loved one.

> It's so quiet in the house. Siv never replies. She just smiles from far away. It is quiet everywhere. Nobody is playing. Nobody is laughing. Nobody is talking about Siv.

We are used to thinking of death as an abrupt end. That is probably why it causes discomfort. But Sande weaves death and life into each other from the first to the last page: one does not exist without the other, and there is no abrupt transition.

Days after the funeral Siv's mother gives Liv Siv's red sweater.

'I take the sweater and put it on. I look in the mirror. Sniff for Siv's scent and feel my arms. Then I run out with the sweater on.

"Look Siv, I'm running for you!"

I run alone, with my own smell and my own arms in the sweater. "Have you gone now, Siv, have you gone inside me?"'

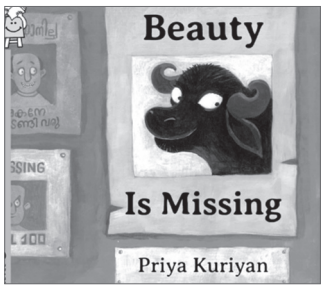
The illustrations are simple and strong, filled with colour and symbolism. They are dreamlike, flowing, mullet-coloured. A few only: Two before the text begins, and five after the text ends. They frame the action. Prepare us for what is to come and perhaps give us closure.

The Red Sweater is a story told with sensitivity. It gives the reader a chance to explore loss and grief. Children may realize that the experience is universal and yet is personal because they connect with the story while reading. We lose people we love, but life goes on. And perhaps they are in a better place after all.

She dreams she is lying afloat
and the water is so gentle
Dark and calm, without a sound
Can life be so peaceful?

Seema

BEAUTY IS MISSING
By Priya Kuriyan
Pratham Books, 2022, pp. 28, ₹ 60.00



When I chose this book based on its title, *Beauty Is Missing*, I had imagined the book. And when I received it and held it in my hands and read the book, the story was far removed from my imagination!

The story begins at a police station, where a woman has come to report her loving buffalo who has gone missing. The story then brings in humour, adventure, and also some filmy twists. Eventually, the thief is caught, and the story reaches its climax at the reunion of the old woman and her buffalo.

The story has been told so that you transform from being a reader to becoming a character in the book who gets fully involved in the search for the buffalo.

When I had selected this book for review, I had imagined that it would be something on the stereotyped notions and standards of beauty prevalent in society. A standard that considers only people with a certain kind of look, skin colour, height, and figure as beautiful. This book does not address any of these issues directly. However, the beauty is that by naming a black buffalo, who is known to be stubborn and unyielding, the story innocuously reminds the reader of these stereotypes to some extent. What is lacking here is then completed with dialogues in the story like: 'Who names a buffalo Beauty!', 'Who would steal that useless buffalo?', 'If she were a pretty cow, I would steal her.'

The two characters of the old woman and the woman police constable have both been crafted and developed very well. They attempt to break two age-old mind-sets, that a woman is not sensitive to another woman, and that a woman police constable is not serious about her job.

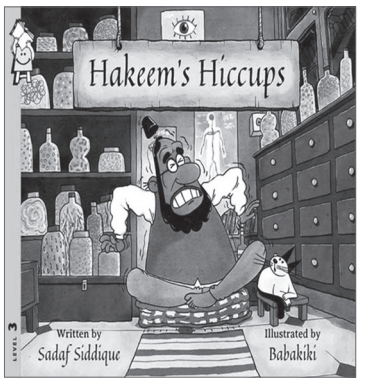
The illustrations in the book not only capture the mood of the story, but also complement it. They capture the ambience of life in the southern part of India through images of the setting. Words written in the Tamil alphabet on trucks, police jeeps and posters add to the linguistic flavour of the book. The colour combinations are also very well suited, although at certain places where the background is dark, using reverse coloured fonts would have given better readability.

The pagination and balance between text and visuals has also been handled with care. The cover with a collage of missing person's posters with the poster of Beauty in between is creatively designed.

However, the end of the story does leave one somewhat disturbed. The mention of the thief stealing the buffalo to sell it to a butcher in the next village brings to mind the recent cases of mob-lynching and killing of people from a particular community in the name of cattle trafficking.

Simran Sadh

HAKEEM'S HICCUPS
By Sadaf Siddique. Illustrations: Studio Babakiki
Pratham Books, 2022, pp. 18, ₹ 55.00



A storyline where the main character has an episode of hiccups makes for an amusing read. Each character comes in to offer solutions to the protagonist, and eventually one of the solutions works out in the end. The theme of a recurring plot helps one stay engaged as the story goes along.

While following this familiar pattern, *Hakeem's Hiccups* comes with an interesting twist in its plot which makes it stand apart from similar stories written on the theme. Water, which is the most commonly advised remedy for hiccups, is not an option for Hakeem as he is fasting in the month of Ramzan and must wait till sunset for iftar to eat or drink anything.

As the visiting patients of Hakeem are offered treatment for their ailments, they in turn offer advice for his hiccups, leading to a conundrum. At last, everyone gathers at Hakeem's residence for a feast, bringing one thing or another for everyone to eat and drink from.

The storybook comes at a time when the lack of diversity and appropriate representation in children's literature is making its way into mainstream conversations and is being critically looked at. The author of the story, who has also co-authored *Muslims in Story: Expanding Multicultural Understanding through Children's and Young Adult Literature,* has represented Muslim culture in this story, which has been either misrepresented or barely given any space in children's literature. Readers who have faced a similar situation can relate to Hakeem's predicament. The story gives them an opportunity to express and share their experiences.

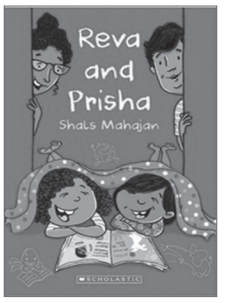
The story attempts to follow a rhyming scheme, which helps bring some flow into the narrative. However, the rhyming scheme of the story comes at the expense of a choice of vocabulary that might pose difficulty in comprehension at various points for the children at the suggested reading level of the story. Words such as *haldi, nuska, sabziwala,* etc. are encountered throughout the story, making the story linguistically diverse. The story beautifully adapts itself to the many different translations available on Pratham's Storyweaver website.

The illustrations in the book take us into Hakeem's universe and add to the humour of the situation. The detailed illustrations widen the scope of engagement with the story as there is always something new that catches your eye with every reading of the story; for example, Hakeem's lurking cat throughout the story, which isn't mentioned in the narrative of the story anywhere. The illustrations open up a lot of space for dialogue with the reader. The expressions of the characters make the story come alive for the readers and add immensely to their reading experience.

The story is a fresh and very rich reflection of the everyday diversity of our society and is a necessary experience for those who culturally identify with the character and those who don't.

Isha Badkas

REVA AND PRISHA
By Shals Mahajan. Illustrations: Lavanya Karthik
Scholastic India, 2021, pp. 88, ₹ 250.00



It's been a while since I have been exploring alternative forms of companionship and family. The main intention behind this exploration is to navigate the potential that these two words carry. And then Reva and Prisha's family grabbed my attention. *Reva and Prisha* is a slice of a life book woven around the world of the twins with their two mothers Runu and Pritam, narrated with fun and love by Shals Mahajan.

Each chapter takes us through the daily conversations in the Sahil family–their discussion around food at the dinner table, experiments with make-up or their insightful discussion about the religion they belong to! It was heartening to read through the curious questions, confusions of the twins and more than that their mothers'—'Amma' and 'Momma'—efforts to engage with them with a pinch of humour and kindness.

Once you start hanging out with the Sahils through the chapters, you come across a 'family song' and this song my friends is the most lovable song you will read. It paints a picture of 'family' that has so many colours and so many different combinations of people coming together to form a family! The following lines capture the essence of it:

A family's a family
No matter how mad!
A family's a family
Who hugs you when you're sad!

I had a really good laugh after reading the chapter 'stripes are slimming'. It talks about Prisha's confusion when she hears one of the teachers–Ms Sowmya–suggesting to her colleague Ms. Gondola to wear stripes as they are slimming, and not checks. Prisha shares this incident with her Momma and asks, 'If stripes make us look thin, can I become invisible if I wear lots of stripes?' But then Prisha also shares Ms. Gondola's reply which is such a cool reply that you have to wait to read this chapter!

I could sense the vulnerability that parenthood offers, through Shals's writing. They transcend the 'societal' expectation of parents being always right, moral, emotionally strong and patient. In fact, these chapters acknowledge the grey areas and push us to see parents as people with questions, confusions and weaknesses. I am in awe of Runu and Pritam as parents who are so 'cool' about their children making mistakes, throwing tantrums, asking uncomfortable questions and providing them the space to be 'themselves'.

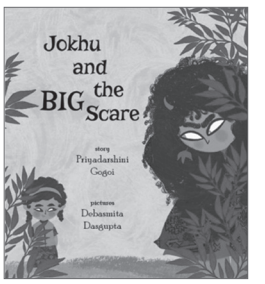
Another remarkable aspect of the book are the adorable illustrations created by Lavanya Karthik. They are so life-like that I could actually see the features of some of my favourite persons in these illustrations–curly hair, broad lip-line, double chins, fat cats and what not! I grinned ear to ear as I reached the end of the book to find the beautiful photos illustrated of the Sahil family! That's definitely the cherry on top!

This book is like a WARM HUG to all those who strongly believe in the innumerable possibilities beyond the binary of black or white, man or woman, good or bad and Hindu or Muslim. This series offers an alternative view on how 'parenthood' and 'structure of a family' can go beyond the heteronormative nature that society promotes. It urges us to acknowledge the rainbow of colours that these words, 'family', 'parenthood', 'companionship' and even 'marriage' holds within them.

A welcome shift in literature, this is a book that represents different shapes that a family can take. Perhaps when such narratives are accessible to us in greater numbers, different forms of families and parenthood would be normalized. We definitely need more of these stories in regional languages also that are contextualized in order to reach a wider audience.

Vaibhav Parel

JOKHU AND THE BIG SCARE
By Priyadarshini Gogoi. Illustrations: Debasmita Dasgupta
Tulika Books, Chennai, 2022, pp. 26, ₹ 195.00



Ghost stories have always had a fascination for children and adults alike. This story uses an Assamese folktale—of the *Jokhini*—and gives it some interesting twists. The *Jokhini* is a demon who lives in the forests of Assam. In traditional folklore, she is a demon who likes to lure grown men. Here, while she is the scariest of all the demons, she is lonely and friendless. Her ability to be scary gives her the only identity that she is proud of.

It is then that a little girl walks by, and all the drama in Jokhu's otherwise boring life begins. We are told that Jokhu loved scaring little girls because 'they screamed the loudest'. But, this girl–whose name we are not given—keeps walking calmly even as the demon swings from tree to tree and adopts tactic upon tactic to scare her. The realization that the girl is not scared of her creates an existential crisis for the demon. Her fellow demons–who were scared of her—mock her. At this point, 'Jokhu bursts into tears'. She was embarrassed because 'scaring was all that she had ever known'.

In a perplexing move, when the girl comes to Jokhu and asks her what's wrong, Jokhu plaintively replies, 'If I can't be scary, what can I be?' The girl says, 'you can be my friend.' From this point on, she teaches Jokhu to be a friend, and she becomes more than a friend–she is a prankster, an acrobat and a joker. In other words, she becomes a 'funny, silly and happy jokhini too'.

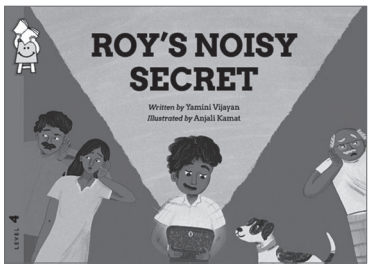
The story speaks to children about the transformative potential of friendship. It also becomes a tale of children being capable of and unafraid to initiate an uninhibited openness to friendship in others.

As a tale it upends the stereotypical gendered idea of girls being 'easy to scare'. What is most charming is the way in which *Jokhu* evolves from being just scary—as all she knew—to embodying multiple identities (prankster, acrobat and joker). It is this change that enables the child reader to feel empowered, channelize her fears to help others, and show the need for all creatures to have friends, even if they be demons!

While the story is pleasant, the illustrations help bring it to life for the reader. The initial illustrations—before Jokhu changes—mimic the stasis in Jokhu's identity as she is pictured similarly in almost every illustration. Her inner transformation, interestingly, is mirrored in her outward being as the illustrations become more colourful and show her performing a variety of joyous actions with her new friend—no longer lonely or sad!

Kavita Tiwari

ROY'S NOISY SECRET
By Yamini Vijayan. Illustrations: Anjali Kamat
Pratham Books, 2022, pp. 16, ₹ 50.00



We all make mistakes. It's impossible to not make any mistakes. Then why do we instill so much fear of making mistakes in children? Is it necessary to give them punishment for unwilling mistakes? Can't we accept their mistakes gently? I think *Roy's Noisy Secret* conveys this message subtly, but effectively.

The book is about a boy named Roy. While trying to wear his grandmother's precious anklet, Roy finds that one of the anklets is stuck in his ankle. He is afraid of getting scolded and punished by his parents as he had been warned not to come into the parent's room in their absence. So, he tries to hide this secret. To cover up, he starts lying, which causes a feeling of guilt. After a few days, when his parents look for the anklet and get worried, Roy's feelings of fear and guilt get further combined with shame.

This book beautifully depicts all the emotions a child may go through after committing an error—fear, sadness and guilt. By setting an example of Roy's parents, the author tries to convey that parents need to understand their child's feelings in these situations. It also conveys that expressing your feelings is the way to get rid of your guilt, shame or grief.

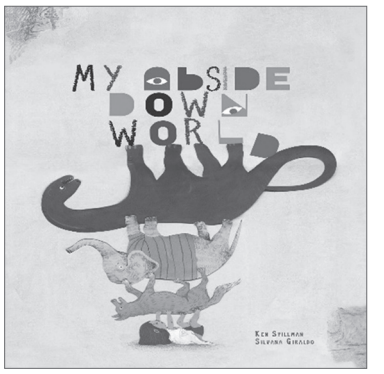
The language of the story is simple and adding Malayalam words line *Achchan, Amma, Ayyo* enhances its flavour. Not only the writer, but the illustrator has also captured all the emotions of Roy beautifully. The dancing of Roy depicts his happiness of playing with anklets, his facial expression while trying to remove the anklet depicts his stress, sweating on forehead shows how much stress he went through to hide the anklet. The illustrator has also added many other details that enrich the text.

The last illustration shows Roy's mother carrying him on the scooter and Roy wearing the anklet. This indicates that Roy's mother didn't make an issue of a boy wearing an anklet. Not only did she accept this within the family, but also affirmed it while going out in society. By doing this she set an example of breaking a gender stereotype.

I think this book of Pratham's is a must-read for children of 8-10 years age. The book opens the door to talk about various issues between adults and children.

Arya Badkas

MY UPSIDE DOWN WORLD
By Ken Spillman and Silvana Giraldo
Pickle Yolk Books, 2021, pp. 32, ₹ 350.00



It was a normal usual day; I was working on a project and here comes my brother—loud as ever—into my room—turns off the light and fan—and leaves. He is very annoying. I was reminded repeatedly of this incident as I read this book, which is about a girl whose world is turned upside down by her big brother.

This book beautifully reflects on how the youngest member of the family is troubled and irritated by her siblings and yet is loved and appreciated, though she may not always feel it. The dynamic between siblings seems relatable, almost palpable as you read the book, on how the elder ones can be annoying and irritating. But at the end of the day, it is all out of love!

This book will take the phrase, 'My head is about to explode to a whole another level' aptly. In the story the mother's head literally explodes and too many things come out of it! To me, it seems like a vivid depiction of how too many thoughts, questions, worries, pressures, deadlines and what not make room in a mother's head. And most often, they do not ever vocalize them but keep them bottled-up in their heads. This also suggests (or rather, questions) how much space we as a family give to each other.

This book will surely turn the reader's head upside down with its illustrations, which are, well, mad! Much like the characters, the illustrations of the background and the 'world' seem half done and may at times also appear confusing. At some points, there are too many figures on one page making it difficult to comprehend. One can guess that the illustrator's attempt is to portray the zillion thoughts that are zipping through the girl's mind, but the portrayal has ended up in confusion. Although one can understand the emotions and intent behind the illustrations, still one cannot but share that they require a long stare to make sense and add up to the story.

Much of the book is relatable and will be enjoyed by all the youngest siblings, but at times the imaginative liberty is a bit too much to comprehend. A little more information or clues about the supposed world would have made this book more understandable and would have conveyed the message it tries to convey. Some elaboration on the world and background on the characters would have made this story interesting.

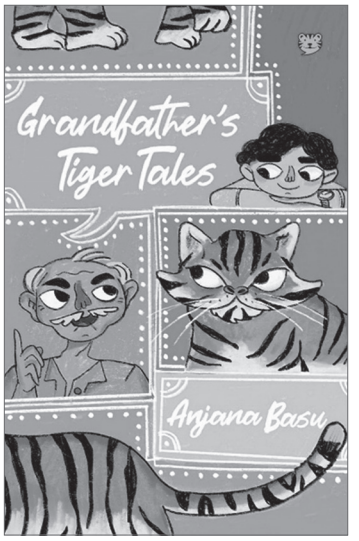
This book is good for a light-hearted one time read and may be relatable to the people of similar family dynamics and siblings. It will also be a joy for people who enjoy abstract books and illustrations.

Bharati Jagannathan

GRANDFATHER'S TIGER TALES
By Anjana Basu. Illustrations: Aaryama Somayaji
Talking Cub, Speaking Tiger Books, 2022, pp. 80, ₹ 299.00

The book comprises three short stories featuring tigers, two of them apparently true, and all where tigers and humans share a symbiotic relationship. All the stories are narrated by 'Dadubhai' to his grandson, Rohan. The 'Tiger which Came to the Cricket Match' is a true story, recorded in the archives of the Calcutta Cricket and Football Club, one of the earliest clubs set up by the British. The tale is well told, with details about the English sahibs' and memsahibs' clothes and picnic hampers, as well as the mild disdain in which their Indian bearers and coachmen held their masters. The nice part of the story is that the presence of a tiger does not lead to any dramatic developments, despite the alarm that it generates. The tiger too, which had probably simply wandered

in—these parts being very much its natural habitat at the time—simply ambles off after a while. A nice touch of humour is added by the detail that, armed with guns, the cricket captains marched into the jungle to demonstrate their courage, but only once the tiger had gone away!



The third story, based on an incident that occurred in 2009, when cyclone Aila devastated the Bengal coastline, again demonstrates the possibility of tigers and humans living together. As the storm gathered and the villagers sheltered in their homes after securing their cattle and boats, a widower, whose sons were away, found as the darkness deepened, a silhouette slinking into his tiny hut. And along with the smells of his cows in the shed beside the house was the unmistakeable smell of tiger. Through the night, the tiger sheltered in the little hut beside the old man, its yellow eyes gleaming every time the man looked. His fright need hardly be described. And, believe it or not, from sheer exhaustion, he eventually fell asleep! In the morning, the storm had passed; the tiger had left behind some scat and pug marks. The old man, who could not believe he had emerged alive after this close encounter, took to considering himself a ghost, and the villagers too started calling him '*Bhutu-da*'.

The second story, however, doesn't work too well. The tale is a fictionalization of the 18th century *Bon Bibi Johuri Nama*, a collection of verses in praise of Bon Bibi, goddess of the Sundarbans. For readers familiar with Amitava Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, this rendition is pretty colourless but even for those who may not know the master's work, the narrative seems rather frayed at the edges. The 'moral' of the tale, that the increasing human-animal conflicts result directly from relentless land-grabbing from the wild, and further, from climate change, is well taken, but the telling of the tale could have been more gripping—after all, there was a tiger involved!

While the first and third stories are engaging, there are strange details like the grandfather's library being lined with leather-bound books, and the grandfather claiming to have been a *shikari* himself.

Really? It seems that the author, a self-confessed Corbett fan recounting tales from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, made the grandfather a nineteenth century man!

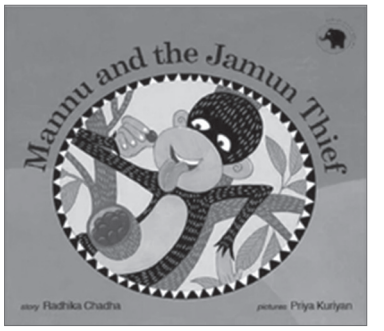
The three or four black-and-white sketches are competent.

Nita Berry

MANNU AND THE JAMUN THIEF
By Radhika Chadha. Illustrations: Priya Kurian
Tulika Books, Chennai, 2021, pp. 24, ₹ 165.00

All summer long, Mannu the monkey has been dreaming of jamun. How he loves the 'Juicy-shoocy jamun! Pulpy-shulpy jamun!' When will they ever ripen on his favourite tree? He can remember how they tingle on his tongue with their sweet-sour taste. And best of all, how they make his tongue turn so purple-black!

It's Jamun Day at last! The jamun tree must be loaded with ripe jamun! Mannu swings excitedly from branch to branch. But he's in for a great big shock. There isn't a single jamun on the tree! The forest floor is only carpeted with broken branches and fallen leaves. No, not a single jamun in sight!



Where have all the jamun gone? Is there a jamun thief around? Mannu swings into action. What do you think he does? This heart-warming picture book for little tots shows us how he tracks the tell-tale signs to find the thief. What is more, in the end Mannu the monkey also finds a most caring friend!

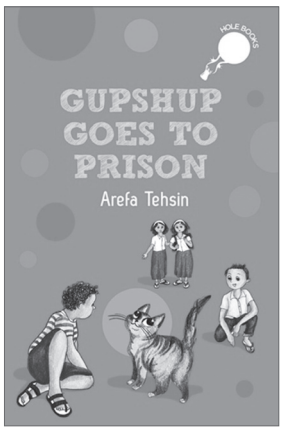
Tulika Books have over the years set a benchmark for well-produced picture books in India, with great storylines, good writing and expressive illustrations. This picture book by Radhika Chadha is the sixth story in the best-selling series about Bahadur the baby elephant and his friends, like Mannu the monkey in this book. A consultant, author and mixed media artist, Radhika's first picture book with Tulika went on to become the best-selling Baby Bahadur series. Little kids are sure to love this heart-warming story with its fun-filled words and sounds, all about Mannu and his friends, and will also enjoy the end.

In a picture book, it's the pictures that tell the story best. Illustrator Priya Kuriyan who worked on the first book of this series right at the beginning of her career, is now considered one of India's best illustrators for children. *Mannu and the Jamun Thief* brings out warmth, colour and lots of humour through her eye-catching illustrations done in a distinctive style. Here is another popular, well-produced picture book from Tulika for the 3+ age group.

Aakangshita Dutta

GUPSHUP GOES TO PRISON
By Arefa Tehsin. Illustrations: Shubhangi Chetan
Duckbill, an Imprint of Penguin Random House, 2022, pp. 74, ₹ 199.00

This children's book is a pleasant surprise and a quick paced, easy read. It begins innocuously with Khalid running after their black-eyed kitten, Gupshup, who characteristically is fast on her feet, is soon lost within the walls of the Sanganer Open Prison. The rest of the story is about Khalid's attempts to find his missing cat Gupshup.



The surprising elements are the well-timed and planned efforts to break down perceptions related to open prisons, prisoners, the lives that they lead, and a brave, courageous attempt to normalize such lives. And in so doing, Arefa Tehsin tries splendidly to mainstream the marginalized, by digging a little deeper into their everyday lives, that truly require the same discipline and routine similar to everyone else that live their lives outside prison walls.

It is through the Voices of Kodi, Che, Guevara and Muthu that we get a glimpse into this world of the Open Prison.

Kodi's parents reflect a story of love and companionship that they found in prison. Their choice to marry and start living a life as close to a normal one, is really a reflection into the minds of many

reformed inmates, who do desire deeply to be integrated back into the society.

Che and Guevara are two precocious girls that have the opportunity to attend school and behave normally like most children who partake in tiny joys of bartering their daunting Maths and Science homework for smaller, more exciting tricks like finding Gupshup.

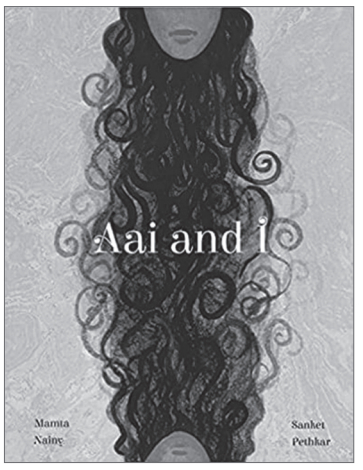
All along, the trope of these stereotypes is embodied in the character of Three Zero Two. Merely a number, surrounded by perceptions and rumours of malevolence and criminality, these are debunked effectively towards the end, by these very children and he is humanized amply–as a rescuer and a cat artist.

This book made me curious about the Open Prison of Sanganer. Further, If read out loud to children, this story carries valuable nuggets of sensitivity and acceptance of diversity. These are pressing and quickly eroding values and story-telling is an effective way to impart these to children.

The illustrations by Shubhangi in the book are delightful, possibly a coloured, glossy version could be added as part of a limited edition.

Amber Khindri Biswas

AAI AND I
By Mamta Nainy. Illustrations: Sanket Pethkar
Pickle Yolk books, 2021 , pp. 32, ₹ 350.00



This story is about a girl named Aadya, and how her life changed after her mother was diagnosed with cancer. When Aadya's mother leaves her with her grandmother and the dog called Nimki to get her treatment, Aadya feels lonely and sad. She misses her mother all the time. She waits and waits, and is sometimes scared, wondering if her mother would come back or not. When her mother finally returns, she can sense that a lot had changed. So the story portrays the beautiful relationship of a child with her mother, who is in her healing phase.

Aadya is a young girl who is still trying to figure out what has happened to her mother. She is confused yet sensitive towards her mother. The story deals with the emotions of a child who is separated, lonely and scared but still stays enthusiastic and hopeful about her situation. She looks forward with hope for the time when her mother would be back and greets her with open arms and love when she does come back.

The contents of this book in terms of language are easy to read and understand. Emotions are clear and out there. The story is very well written and it conveys its beautiful message without making it too heavy for the readers, even when the subject deals with a serious medical condition like cancer.

And the thing that makes the book standout even more is the fact that this is a children's book. We live in a society where even today cancer is treated as a disease that should not be talked about. This book raises a very important issue that there is a need for normalization in society, especially when many families and lives have been affected by it.

Personally I found this book beautiful yet painful. The illustrations are beautiful and self-explanatory. Loved the closure and pictures.

I believe this book can play an important role in children's literature. Overall, it was a good reading experience.

Lovis Simon

IT'S TIME TO RHYME: POEMS FOR KIDS OF ALL AGES
By Shobha Tharoor Srinivasan. Illustrations: Priya Kurian
Aleph, 2022, pp. 46, ₹ 399.00

There is an interesting quote that John Keating, a character played by actor Robin Williams says in the movie, *Dead Poet's Society* about literature, 'We don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race and the human race is filled with passion and medicine, law, engineering, these are noble pursuits to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love. These are what we stay alive for.' While reading the book *It's Time to Rhyme*, I went back to my school days, recalling how I studied poems through the traditional method of reading the poem out loudly and the meaning explained, word by word. I really wish I had this book when I was in school.

Shobha Tharoor has captured the essence of poetry with a plethora of poems in the book such as Sonnet, Haiku, Diamante, Limerick, Nonets, Villanelle, Couplet, onomatopoeia. The book is written in a style where the author introduces each type of poem in such a manner that one gets to understand the rules of the poem while reading it. It is almost like a 'metapoem' where you talk about the poem, through a poem. This book enables the reader to actually go beyond the words and their literal meanings, of how you perceive the world around and most importantly how to read poetry with the rhythm. The author gives you a glimpse into how poetry is actually a play with words and in fact, one may even make you move, dance or just tap your toes in the groove.

Here I quote one my favourite poems from the book where the author talks about a particular form of poem called An Acrostic Verse.

An acrostic verse is fun to create
Count the letters for lines: this one has eight.
Read and write the first letter
Or first word of each line.
So it describes it much better,
The word or phrase that you find.
It's a special form, whose message is clear
Creating a word as it's meant to appear.

I have to say this here that the book is not just for kids but is meant for people across all ages, parent, teacher or just a reader who enjoys poetry.

Deepali Shukla

MANY COLOURS OF US!
By Lavanya Kapahi. Illustrations: Mansi Dwivedi
Tulika Books, Chennai, 2022, pp. 28, ₹ 215.00

Colours are not only spread all around us, but they also bear an impact on our minds and influence the way we think. This book presents for its readers the rich diversity in terms of nature, culture and food habits around us.

Although Lavanya has tried to weave it into the shape of a story where a small bird has to select a colour for itself, this is predominantly a thematic and informative book. Every page brings with it a new colour and gives some new information and helps children explore the cultural diversity of the country. The readers travel with the bird—sometimes to the Pink City, to the Satpura forests, at times to the snow-laden Himalayas, or else to the lakes of Spiti.

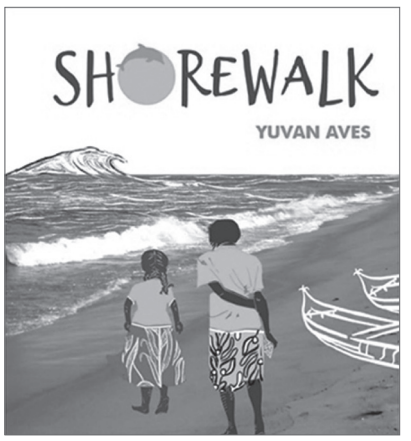
The book is also of interest as it carries a lot of information about the country woven in a rhythm. The language of the narrative is simple, and the name of the place the bird is visiting is given in bold to catch the attention of the reader.

The illustrations in the book attempt to take the text ahead. A mix of illustrations and photographs is used and extends the informative base of the narrative. Although a balance has been attempted between the text and illustrations, on some pages, the illustrations seem to weigh heavy on the text. However, what bothers the eye is that the little bird has been humanized in the illustrations, as it kills the natural-ness of the bird. Since, the book revolves around diversity, it is not too much to expect that the reality of diversity also be maintained in the illustrations. This would also encourage the reader to explore and observe the diversity around her/himself.

Kapahi focuses more on natural and cultural diversity. However, as parents and teachers, we often face the need to talk to children about social diversity. The book seems to steer clear of this more difficult area related to diversity.

Shubhangi Pandit

SHOREWALK
By Yuvan Aves
Tulika Books, Chennai, 2022, pp. 36, ₹ 280.00



The book is an absolute treasure with a most graceful rendering to help children discover their connect with the sand and sea and all life in between. It starts with a preface where the author, a naturalist, talks about how his interest in coastal biodiversity grew and how he learnt and drew inspiration from the wisdom of a skilled fisherfolk. He gently urges children to visit seashores and experience the innumerable mysteries unfolding there.

The narrative is held by the simple story of a little girl Kadalamma on her daily walk by the beach with her grandfather, Palayam in the village Urur. As we join them on their walk, we meet the sand and sea-dwellers—crabs, sea turtles, sea snails, clams, dolphins, migratory birds, mangroves, and get to know their specific names, distinctive features and unique habits. Simple and tiny sketches stitching interesting trivia and fragments about the flora and fauna of the ocean is stacked up alongside to pique the interest of children. An adult companion can help the young reader with elaboration and additional pictures wherever needed. A foot-note on every spread alerts us on the disturbances endangering the delicate balance held by these rich coastlines.

This seemingly light book is packed full and spilling over with insights into how all life is held by the surrounding oceans. The beautiful photographs bring the book alive. The quality of the colourful pages is very good. Neat font formats highlight the organization of text.

The varied and interesting content makes it a book for keeps that can be used by children (9 year onwards), parents or teachers to kindle or revive the nature connections.

Ilika Trivedi

TALES FROM THE WORLD
By Geeta Ramanujam
Puffin Books, 2022, pp. 182, ₹ 399.00

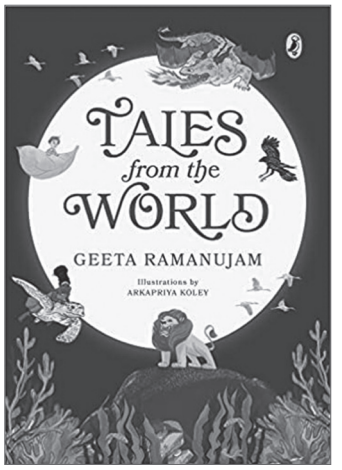
Tales passed down from one generation to the next have been the mainstay of all cultures, countries and families. The act of sharing these stories is such a crucial aspect of a child's growth that almost all forms of media, be it movies or television shows, make it a point to highlight the tradition of bedtime stories shared between parents, grandparents and children. *Tales from the World* is a beautiful book filled with many such stories, all of which can become the highlight of family time. Even the look and feel of the book is similar to children's storybooks with shiny, glossy, colourful pages and beautiful illustrations to stimulate the imagination of young readers and listeners.

Geeta Ramanujam is a certified storyteller and this book is an excellent attempt at bringing tales from lands far and wide, into a single compendium for an interesting and knowledgeable offering. India, Africa, Scotland, Tibet, Russia, China and Japan are just some of the regions whose stories are included in this book. You name the country, and the story is here.

Ancient storytelling traditions of different countries and cultures have been presented imaginatively. Some of the traditions included in this book are Koogere of Uganda, Zulu folklore of South Africa, Kamishibai storytelling of Japan, Jataka tales of Buddhism and the Anansi tales from Ghana. Storytelling is truly an act that unites us all, despite any differences that may divide humanity. Manzandaba looking for stories to tell her children in 'The Storytelling Shell' is an honest depiction of humanity as a whole and in this manner, this book brings the origin of stories in a story too!

Young children would love these tales as bedtime stories, especially because of the magical realism factor. These tales are filled with

birds, animals and even dragons to make things interesting! *Panchatantra* tales are famous in India, involving different animals with their own thoughts and feelings, a common theme across stories, from completely unrelated corners of the world. These stories are a great foundation for children in order to realize the importance of each species, especially in a deteriorating world damaged by climate change, and instil a sense of respect for nature from childhood itself.



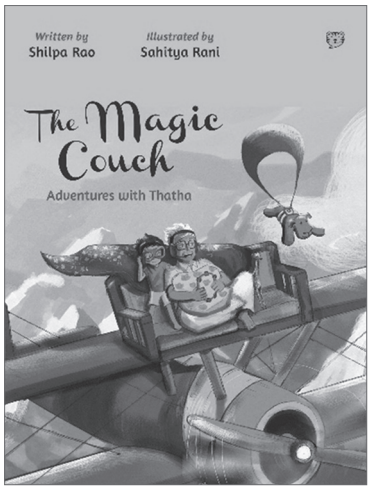
Further, natural formations like rivers, mountains, Northern Lights and the Milky Way are portrayed as living entities, with their own narratives and personal lives and the stories of curious incidents explain the formation of entities like lakes and rivers. Meru, the mountain missed his bird friend Maya endlessly and cried in her memory to create a beautiful lake. And the Raven played with the sun, moon and stars and brought light into this dark world. These short stories would capture the curiosity of young minds and parents should be prepared to answer the litany of questions that are sure to follow afterwards.

These stories give ample opportunities for active narration with multiple characters, animated voice modulations and dramatic changes in the storyline, which can build an amazing reading and listening experience at the same time. A story that stood out was 'How the Dragons Brought Rivers to China' which is about the four major rivers in China and how they came to be. Another curious tale is the one about the Hornbills of Tripura. These stories are engaging and knowledge building at the same time. These tales also give important lessons of kindness, listening to one's parents, care, friendship, humility and teamwork.

Bharati Jagannathan

THE MAGIC COUCH: ADVENTURES WITH THATHA
Written by Shilpa Rao. Illustrations: Sahitya Rani
Talking Cub, Speaking Tiger Books, 2022, pp. 24, ₹ 399.00

The picture book by Shruti Rao and Sahitya Rani is wholly disappointing. The grandfather here, '*Thatha*', is the young narrator's best friend, and they go off on imaginary adventures every day. Hackneyed plot apart, there is no coherence to the book as it unfolds—each page has a rather strained verse about something entirely unrelated to either the previous or succeeding pages. These magic flights of grandfather and grandson are given some explanations at the end, which I guess are supposed to contribute to the potential reader's 'general knowledge'. And even these two-bit details are unimaginative—I cannot conceive of any child who would be fired to discover more about the Bay of Bengal, Ladakh, the Nilgiris, Mandya (a farming district in Karnataka) or the Mars project of ISRO because of the dull paragraph about each. The incongruity of the selection speaks for itself!

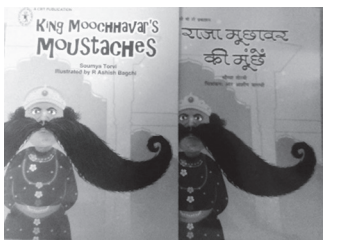


One can understand entertaining one's own child with such magic tales, or encouraging one's child as s/he imagines fictional worlds, but surely editors exist to bring something more to a book than random flights of fancy! Unfortunately, the illustrations are as unimaginative as the text!

Nitika Meena

KING MOOCHHAVAR'S MOUSTACHES; RAJA MOOCHHAVAR KI MOONCHHEIN
By Soumya Torvi. Illustrations: Ashish Bagchi. Translated into Hindi by Kusumlata Singh
Children's Book Trust, 2022, pp. 16, ₹ 60.00

This is a story about a kingdom called 'Moochhapur'. Bankim, a traveller on his way comes across this unique name for a place and wishes to go and see the same. The story is narrated by Bankim. When he enters the kingdom, he sees men with all types of moustaches—big, small, curled, and more. People appear busy with their work with large moustaches. Then he comes across a moustache salon where men are getting their moustaches massaged. Bankim then decides to visit the palace of this unique kingdom. He is stopped at the entrance as he does not have a moustache. Bankim goes to the salon and gets himself an artificial moustache and then goes to the palace again.



At the court, he sees that all the courtiers are sporting different styles of moustaches. The king enters the court with two guards, each holding one end of his long moustache. Then a merchant presents the king with *lassi* (sweetened butter milk). Then a *pehelwan* comes and performs stunts with his moustaches. That is when the court receives a message that dacoits are coming to attack the kingdom. The king goes to fight the dacoits. Along with the king, his two guards also go on horses, each holding one end of the king's moustache. The king defeats the dacoits. While coming back to the palace, one of the guard's horse gets stuck while the other goes on, taking with him one half of the king's moustaches. With half a moustache left on his face, the king is embarrassed. After a week of locking himself in his room, he passes a rule that everyone in this kingdom would keep half a moustache. The kingdom is renamed, 'Ek Moochhapur'.

Guards or servants moving around with the king, holding his moustaches while he eats or drinks, people with no moustaches not being allowed inside the palace, and all of this because the king likes it or wants it a certain way—these are all examples of how the story reinforces the structural ill-practices of the time when kings and their rules dominated. There is no space for men who do not wish to keep a moustache, and more so, no space for women or girls at all, in this story.

The story also shows how moustaches are a sign of masculinity. When the king loses half a moustache in a fight, he is embarrassed and doesn't step out of his room for a week. He is not concerned about his kingdom or how things will function in his absence, but

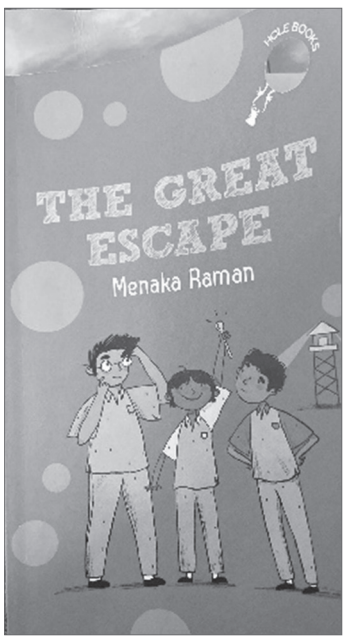
rather broods over losing half a moustache.

The narrative lacks flow, and at the turn of every page something entirely new is happening, leaving the last part hanging.

The illustrations outweigh the story. They are funny, colourful and depict the story well and suit the interest of the target age group.

Aakangshita Dutta

THE GREAT ESCAPE
By Menaka Raman. Illustrator: Sheena Deviah
Duckbill, An Imprint of Penguin Random House, 2022, pp. 74, ₹ 199.00



This is a story about Sachit, a boy studying in Class III who joins the Wunderkind Academy and has recently shifted to the city of Bangalore and his adjustment perils thereon.

In Sachit's mind, escaping this new school seems like the opportunity for adventure and a gateway to freedom. Freedom from unfamiliar classmates, a large school with maze like zones and blocks, and possibly a way to be back in the more relaxed days of his school in Mumbai.

Interestingly this is a plan that is hatched in the school bathroom when Sachit befriends Hari and Kris.

We are told that both Kris and Hari are also somewhat of a misfit in this school and since misery often loves company, Sachit along with these two boys device on possible plans to escape school.

These plans are mostly preposterous, however their will and imagination is humoured. Sachit's plan to imitate the great escape plans from a movie make these adventures funny and as well endearing.

While the plans to succeed don't really fructify and the boys do end up in the Principal's Office, there too they seem to be in luck where Principal Bala appears to be himself seeking a possible escape plan. An escape that would help him avoid an interaction with the school inspector.

The boys do end up successfully executing such an escape with little help from Principal Bala.

The book touches upon the theme of friendships and the diverse ways in which children go about making friends. Their often tacit acceptance of others exactly as they are and a deeper understanding that sometimes the shared journey can be so much more fun than the final destination itself.

Here too, what started out with a depiction of complete alienation for Sachit, moved to a place where even though they are caught, they agree, this was a fun adventure that they had had in the school.

It is an easy, fun read, although it can get a bit monotonous. The Illustrations by Sheena Deviah definitely add joyful graphic depictions to the ongoing story.

Anurag Dwary

JAMLO CHALTI GAYI
By Samina Mishra. Illustrated by Tariq Aziz
Eklavya, 2022, pp. 32, ₹ 75.00

Jamlo is walking even today. She is walking for a world that needs justice and equality. Samina Mishra, Tariq Aziz, and Sushil Joshi who has woven the story in Hindi, haven't just put down some words and lines and images. They have created a chronicle.

This book is a document that goes much ahead of the headlines about Jamlo on television or in the newspapers. This document presents a parallel–where there is a world of Jamlo, and a parallel world of Tara, Amir and Rahul. One is the virtual world of children surrounded by computers. The other is the real world of Jamlo carrying a bagful of dried red chillies home, longingly watching the *dosas* at a street-side food stall, feeding a dry red chilly to the parrot.

On 24th March 2020, the Prime Minister pronounced that Jamlo and her likes have four hours to tie up their beds and beddings and life's belongings. The order was meant for Tara, Amir and Rahul too….but they could watch Jamlo's world on TV. Jamlo only had the images of her village and her parents in her eyes…

It was a 200 kms long journey that Jamlo had embarked on with a bagful of dried red chillies. And she was carrying the hunger in her belly that had taken this 12-year old daughter of Chhattisgarh to the distant fields of Bijapur in Telangana to pluck chillies as a farm labourer.

When 12-year old Jamlo of Aaded village of Chhattisgarh joined a coffle of farm labourers walking back home, she had hoped that she would soon be able to reach home. The only daughter of her parents, Jamlo walked for four days on rough and rugged forest roads, but just a few kilometres from her village… a leaf turned pale and left the tree… Jamlo closed her eyes...

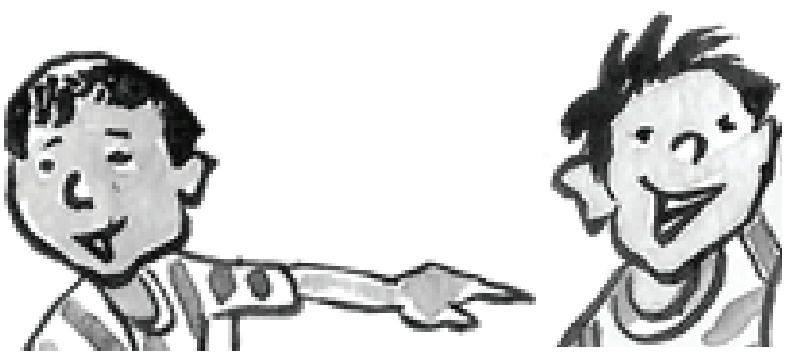
Turning the pages of *Jamlo Chalti Gayi*, you can ask yourself:

Why on earth did a 12-year old girl have to travel to another State so far from home to work?

Why did she have to work and earn at an age when she should have gone to school?

Did Jamlo die, or did this system kill her?

This book will not give you any answers. It will only shake you up and ask more questions. Hopefully, it will also encourage many more Jamlos, Taras, Amirs and Rahuls to ask these questions and seek the answers for themselves…



How Books Work Like Windows and Mirrors!

Samina Mishra in Conversation with Ruchi S. and Tultul Biswas

Question: You are a film-maker by training and profession. What brings you to children's books?

Samina Mishra: I came to children's books via a film that I was hoping to make but didn't. That turned into *Hina in the Old City* (that Eklavya has now republished as *Hina in Purani Dilli*), my first book for children. But my interest in creating media for children predates that—I had explored that in my student work in Jamia. So in a sense I think I am just telling stories in different mediums, and I am interested in creating work for, with and about children.

Q: What did Jamlo's story do to you, as a person? As a professional?

SM: The pandemic has been such a landmark event in our times and yet in many ways, it was just an underlining of what was going on in the world before. The horrors of the pandemic were made possible by a world that had been treating many groups in inhuman ways, a corollary of the inequity—which is why a 12-year old child had to leave home to work, and then she had to try and find her way back home without support. Reading about Jamlo and then writing this book made me even more conscious of my own privilege and of literature's role as memory-keeper. It has always been important to me that what I create can help in leading to a more meaningful understanding of our lives today. And I think that in writing *Jamlo Walks*, I was able to articulate this more clearly for myself—I had to ask myself why this story, what about this story, and why should it be for children. It sharpened my awareness of why and how children's books are political, and how important it is for me to embed in my work that there is no one way of being Indian.

Q: Both your books for children—*Hina* and *Jamlo*—are chronicles of time. Yet, both are very different in their style, tapestry, emphasis. How would you describe this difference?

SM: *Hina in the Old City* was published in 2000 and *Jamlo Walks* in 2021—that's two decades of working across different media. There have been other books for children in the middle, documentary films, working with sound and teaching. All of this has impacted my practice—my articulation of the stories I want to tell, playing with how I want to tell them, my conceptual understanding of childhood... I think there's much more confidence and a sharper awareness of working with both content and form. So, I guess the difference between *Hina* and *Jamlo* comes from a life having been lived and all that comes with it.

Q: The juxtaposition of Amir, Tara...what was your thought behind this?

SM: The pandemic affected everyone differently, it was much more difficult for some than others. I wanted the story to record that, so that children remember how there are many ways of being in the world, many ways of being Indian. But I also wanted the story to have Tara, Rahul and Aamir because of the commonalities. All children suffered in the pandemic, even those who were far more secure than Jamlo suffered, in different ways. This experience of loss and difficulty can be a way to connect us to someone very different from us, to remember that at the heart of being human lies the commonality of feeling—sometimes it's joy and sometimes it's sorrow. That awareness can begin a conversation, a process of reflection.

Q: The way Tariq Aziz's illustrations complement the textual flow of Jamlo is remarkable. Tell us about the process and your experience of working with the illustrator.

SM: Tariq came on to the project after the story was finalized but his contribution to the book is equal to mine. We worked virtually of course and I still haven't met him in person, but that never became a challenge. He worked with the art director, Devangana Dash, and they shared an initial layout with me, after which they shared each spread as it was being done. They were very open to my responses and we spent time thinking about what clothes she should wear, what kind of bag the chillies should be in, her expression, etc. They looked for images on the internet and found a passport photo of Jamlo that Tariq used as a reference. I just made minor suggestions because Tariq did such a fantastic job with the colours, texture and the composition in each spread. I think he has demonstrated an exceptional understanding of visual language—he managed to convey the emotions through the visual characterization of the figures and their interaction with the spaces, objects and other figures in the frame. It was challenging to illustrate a story for children with a difficult and sad context but Tariq found ways to include visual moments of hope and colour.

Actually, I think *Jamlo Walks* is a wonderful example of the kind of collaborative process that picture book publishing can be.

Q: What was your story behind writing *Jamlo Walks*? What was the writing process like?

SM: The first draft just came, the story of Jamlo juxtaposed with the other children. I wrote it just the way it came, without thinking about the reader. It was only after speaking to my editor that I started thinking of it in the form of a picture book. It's a spare text but there was a lot of writing and editing that led to the final version. The challenge for me was to write it to convey a sense of the journey, the texture of the space, a sense of character—all the things that can allow a reader to find a connection. There was not much to go on for these things. Normally, I would have tried to get a sense of these things by actually going out into the field but we were in lockdown. So, I created a Jamlo from my imagination. I turned to her inner world to tell the story for which I drew upon my experiences of children and childhood. So, Jamlo tries to befriend a bird, she thinks of trees, of her parents feeling proud of her. I think children everywhere have similar experiences of this kind that are part of their inner worlds—different yet recognizable—and I hope Jamlo did too. The other children came from my experience of the pandemic world, what I saw and heard children and parents struggling with—the loss of school, the absence of friends, the desire to protect your children… I thought a lot about craft in the process, how to tell a layered story in which Jamlo is more than just a girl who walked during the lockdown but didn't reach home.

Q: Have you read this story with children or young adults? What was their response?

SM: I have done readings with some groups of children and many other dedicated educators have used it in their work and I have been privileged to listen to their accounts of using it with diverse groups of children—rural, urban, primary classes, senior classes. The responses have affirmed how books work like windows and mirrors—e.g., children in villages in Jharkhand felt a resonance with Jamlo because their fathers had walked back to the villages during the lockdown; or some urban children resonated with Rahul's experience of looking

out of the window to see what was happening outside or Amir's internet breaking up.

And then there have been children from English-medium schools in cities who have spoken of how the book made them think of their privilege or the fact that we all have something in common, a connection even if we are not alike.

At a festival, I was a little concerned because I think the book needs a longer conversation with children than is possible at a festival reading. So, I started by asking the children if they were OK with listening to a story that's not happy. Many of them said yes to that and when I asked why they were OK with it, they told me that it was important to listen to all kinds of stories because life is not always happy, and that everybody's stories should get a chance to be heard. Children continue to surprise us and challenge adult pre-conceptions—and I am glad that I get to experience that.

Harjinder Singh 'Laltu'

AAO BHAI KHILLOO (आओ भाई खिल्लू)*
By Prabhat. Illustrations: Bhargava Kulkarni
2022, pp. 47, ₹ 150.00

JUNGLE KE BEECH TRAIN KHADI THI (जंगल के बीच ट्रेन खड़ी थी)*
By Manoj Kumar Jha. Illustrations: Neelesh Gehlot
2021, pp. 54 , ₹ 90.00

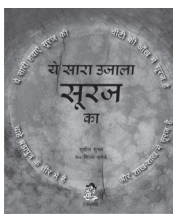
JUGNU BHAI (जुगनू भाई)*
By Balaswaroop Rahi. Illustrations: Himanshu Ujinwal
2022, pp. 16, ₹ 50.00

PAANI UTARA TEEN PAR (पानी उतरा टीन पर)*
By Pramod Pathak. Illustrations: Neelesh Gehlot
2021, pp. 14 , ₹ 40.00

TAUL TAPUL (टाउल टापुल)*
By Shyam Sushil. Illustrations: Gauravi Sharma
2021, pp. 35, ₹ 110.00

*Jugnu Prakashan, New Delhi

YEH SAARA UJALA SURAJ KA (ये सारा उजाला सूरज का)
By Sushil Shukla: Illustrations: Shilpa Ranade
Eklavya, 2022, pp. 10, ₹ 55.00



These six books provide a glimpse into what is being written for children in Hindi today. Three of the writers—Sushil Shukla, Prabhat and Manoj Jha have already made their place in contemporary Hindi literature (for adults). In particular, Prabhat has a distinct standing and his writings depict the folk experience uniquely. His works are often beautifully lyrical. Sushil Shukla has edited magazines for children, and has wide experience of children's literature. Manoj Jha's poetry draws attention. His works for children are also noteworthy.

All these collections carry remarkable artwork. Formalistic changes have occurred in illustrations in children's literature in the last decades of the previous century. This has influenced the world of Hindi writing too, and those working on children's literature have paid special attention to it. Pictures with spray of colours make the reading more interesting. It does indeed make the books more expensive, but with help coming as generous grants from agencies, children of all sections do get to read them.

There has been a change in the thinking on literature for children and adolescents in recent decades. Earlier, most poems were confined to *chanda-mama, hathi-ghoda, raja-rani*, etc. Younger children enjoy rhymes. But just as the games and toys for children have changed with time, similarly it is important to think of the transformations that have occurred in what they want to read. Even today, until about the age of two years, children like to listen to old-fashioned lullabies. But as they grow into a talking age, they develop interest in gadgets like the telephone, mobile phone, computer, and so on, and by the age of four, they begin using them. At this stage, old style stories of the princes/princesses, and rhymes can be interesting to them only when rich in fantasy and imagination. Especially, writing for adolescents today cannot be greatly different from adult literature. Keeping this in mind, one can say that the content in these six books is mostly not for adolescents. These books are meant for younger children. With this understanding, we can look at these works more meaningfully.

It seems that the poets have not worried much about the target audience. This could be a subject of contention, because it is not necessary that a writer must consciously decide on their target audience. What must be written for young children is a matter of serious reflection. Shyam Sushil attempts this by writing *ulta-pulta* as *Taul-tapul*. Many children write their letters inverted because of dyslexia. Many others just play with words by inverting the letters when they speak. His attempts of this nature in two of his poems, the title poem '*Taul-tapul*' and another one titled '*Tejumesat*', are indeed quite nice, but all the other poems in his collection are rather stereotypical.

Several poems in all the six collections appear to be taking recourse to the phonemes or sounds that the words make, for example, '*Chheenk*' and '*Aloo Khaa Loon*' by Prabhat, '*Ghaoon Maoon*' by Shyam Sushil, '*Baadal Ghir Ghir Ghir Gaya*' by Manoj Jha, etc. This is a traditional style that seeks children's interest. Many children learn the letters and develop their vocabulary using such phonemes and matching them with the text. It is easy to create a rhyme using phonetics and often while writing for children we are trapped into it. But we do have to worry about what is interesting in the content beyond the metric of sounds.

Children listen to elders with a lot of attention and they struggle to infiltrate that world of unknown mysteries, in which the adults are diving all the time. Children want to penetrate the layers and levels of imagination the same way as the adults do; in fact, the potential for such explorations is much more in them than it is in the adults. This is true in spite of the time scale involved in unravelling the complexities of life. This is why we should not be afraid of expressing our adult worries in front of them, albeit it must be done with care and affection ensuring that it does not scare them. Such attempts are visible in these collections, but rarely. An example of this is a quatrain by Manoj Kumar Jha, *Khet Malik ka Hai*…The land belongs to the tiller, not to those who are politically powerful. Also, the tiller is allowed this privilege by that plot of earth, which is the farm. Here, the poet has expressed that we must respect the earth and the farmer who has an organic relation with it.

The genius that Prabhat showed in his earlier works is less sighted in these poems. His remarkable mastery of rhythm prevails, but the sharpness in the content that we expect from him is not there in abundance here. When it does appear, it brings joy to the soul, as

for example, the *semal* flower expressing *kabool* for the love of the earth, the mother and daughter ants sitting in a rose appreciating the beauty of the moon in the dark, or the crow sitting on a damaged truck in the city, desiring to visit their village, the announcement for the '*khaas-o-aam*' (the elite and the masses) that *aam* (mango) has arrived, or talking to the fountain as '*O jharne*'—these are some of the examples where he maintains his mastery of the muse. These are beautiful works of art, and it is mere chance that they also happen to be for children. But then he also has silly rhymes like *khillu, millu, dillu*, presumably to make little ones dance like monkeys to the sounds of these words and here he disappoints the reader.

Manoj's poetry has a new kind of imagination; for instance, a parakeet explains what traffic congestion is to another parakeet by saying '*poora jhund khaane lage ek hee aam*' (all of them in a group began eating the same mango together). It needs skill to put across a matter of concern for adults to children as a fun thing and Manoj possesses it. Occasionally he shows an open commitment to progressive thought. For example, we find *Naani* for me or for Abdul is the same being, a flag here or for Bangladesh is the same thing and the water for India and Pakistan may be called differently but they have the same natural properties. This is a beautiful attempt to challenge the narrow-mindedness of cultural nationalism. When the entire planet and humankind is in crisis, it is indeed praiseworthy that he attempts to convince children that we are the same human beings all across the planet. And he also maintains his regional identity in his rhymes, as for example in following up '*dheere-dheere-chalo*' with '*theere-theere-chalo*'.

Sushil Shukla makes good use of his diverse experience and weaves it into the craft of wordplay. His poems commenting obliquely on environment and contemporary politics, while talking of sunlight, are good. Indeed, all the light we have is from the sun. The use of the words '*Nazarbandi*' and '*Desh-nikaala*' in this poem are quite appropriate. The purpose is not to enlighten children on solar energy or about contemporary politics; rather, it is an attempt to say something interesting for children while remaining honest to oneself. This is what an aware writer must do. And along with it comes the aesthetic of the ocean of sunlight within oneself.

Pramod Pathak's poems are also out of the ordinary. But Balswaroop Rahi treads the traditional path. Rahi has a significant place in children's literature in Hindi. He is a songwriter and naturally takes recourse to rhymes. This makes him more readable, but this is more a taste of the once child now elderly kind of crowd and not a taste of the children today. He has always aimed towards sending a message across via his writing for children. This can be seen in phrases like 'you shall shine when you will find yourself of use to someone'. One should stay away from such pontifications, and if a message must go out, then it need not be hammered home. Pramod has used rhyming phonemes matching in sound, but he has done it with an aesthetic sense and quality. For instance, his poem '*Bhor*' has compositions like '*maddham-maddham*', '*Dhallam-Dhallam*' placed well together with the moon, the stars, the night, the sun. In other poems, this aesthetic is even better flourished–as in '*Chaand ki chiDiya*', witness '*Raat ke bhuTTe mein/ thaaron ke daane*' (grains of stars in the maize of the night) or in another poem one finds pretty combinations like '*theethar thaare*' and '*shikaari chanda*'. At the same time, he is no more than being traditional when rhyming in poems like '*Sooraj ji*'.

In all these collections, the first objective is to let children celebrate with happiness. The animals written about in these poems are close to the world of children. They can play and dance while reading these poems. Alternately, grown-ups can read these poems to them. Usually, children like to read more about people slightly older than them. These collections are lacking in this and they have little about other children.

The child today is the reader of tomorrow's adult literature. In the final analysis, every adult has a child within them, who wants to dive into the fantasy world. Most writers of adult literature in Hindi do not write for children. There has been some change in this in the recent decades. It is good to see these collections in such a changing environment. The writers and the publishers deserve praise for this.

Dhruva Desai

NARAM GARAM DOSTI
By Neetu Yadav. Illustrations: Shefalee jain
Muskaan, 2022, pp. 13, ₹ 85.00

Naram Garam Dosti is a gentle children's picture book. The story doesn't follow a traditional pattern of introduction—problem—crescendo—resolution (or any other common pattern, for that matter). It is a slice-of-life story, highlighting the life and experiences of the main characters, and making several important points along the way—but never hitting you over the head with them.

The story follows Kalla—a young boy who will not be receiving the promised sweater-of-his-own this year, as his grandmother's ill health meant that the family's earnings were spent on her treatment. Kalla manages the winter in his old holey hand-me-down sweater, figuring out for himself the best ways to navigate the cold–including finding the sunniest patches of the ground where he takes his goats to graze. He enjoys going to school, not least because of his dear friend Rajdeep. Rajdeep also, like Kalla, has a hand-me-down sweater, in his case it's one that is two sizes too large for him. On a particularly cold day in class, Kalla goes missing as he ventures out looking for some warmth, and Rajdeep goes looking for him. One could argue that what then transpires forms the 'climax' of the story, but it isn't a climax in the traditional sense of the word—it is merely a pause during this episode in their lives. The book does leave the readers with a '*naram, garam*' feeling of their own.

One of the things that struck me about the book is how it is making several important points; representing the realities of children from marginalized communities that rarely make it to media otherwise. However, it does so in a matter-of-fact manner. We are led to understand that Kalla (and Rajdeep) are from families that are not well off through their day-to-day circumstances, without ever being told (as we too often are in children's books) 'they are poor'. Even more strikingly, the book avoids the all-too-common pitfall of pitying, fetishizing, or romanticizing such communities and lives. We learn for instance, that Kalla's family doesn't make food at home during the day—Kalla and his siblings eat in the school—and the night's food is made based on the day's earnings. We see the importance of the mid-day meal in their lives, and the various struggles they face and the failures of various systems that have led them to this point. This opens up—in the hands of a critical and sensitive facilitator (whether a teacher or an older sibling or anyone else)—several essential conversations with younger readers about these issues.

The story addresses other important issues—the passing mention of Kalla taking the family's goats to graze complicates the issue of children and work (all too often over-simplified and vilified as 'child

labour'). Perhaps most strikingly to me, the book shows a deep, caring, and *nurturing* friendship between two boys—something we almost never see in our stories, which is a model all our younger (and indeed older) readers need to see.

The illustrations in this book, by Shefalee Jain, are extremely well suited to the tone and content of the book, without being bound by them. They follow the story, while adding small details here and there—making the book a delight for those who are following along with the text as well as those who are simply enjoying the images. The illustrations do a wonderful job of showing Islam in public life—more essential in today's cultural scenario than perhaps ever before. The illustrator depicts with equal skill the chaos of a busy city market and the calm of a field of grazing goats, ending with a fantastical dreamscape that perfectly represents the emotions of the story in that moment. The illustrations also show my favourite mini-story within the story—Kalla's gift for Rajdeep—without the text ever needing to mention it.

As a teacher, I will definitely read this book with my students. At ₹ 85.00, this is relatively cheap for a coloured picture-storybook, and should be a part of all children's libraries. Books like this serve two extremely important purposes—the representation of voices in literature that too often go unheard, as well as the exposure of children from traditional 'reading' backgrounds—the middle and upper classes—to experiences that they could easily go their whole lives without engaging with. I feel that children [approximately] of age 8-9 years old could read this story independently, but younger children can certainly listen to it being read aloud, and engage with the illustrations. Perhaps the only downside to the story is that its nature does not lend itself to the kind of writing that many children are most familiar with—formulaic [or otherwise] stories with thrilling plots, or moments of drama and/or comedy—and so the presence of the adult [teacher or parent or librarian] to help take the moments of reflection this story generates is made more necessary.

Atul Wadhwani

KITAABON MEIN BILLI NE BACCHE DIYE HAIN
By Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena. Illustrations: Debabrat Ghosh
Jugnoo, 2022, pp. 39, ₹ 130.00

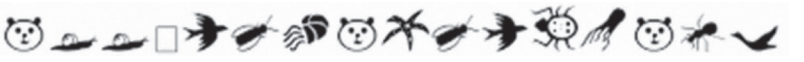
Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena and his poems have long overwhelmed generations of children and adults alike. This fresh compilation of his most twisted yet savoury poems, with the title set to be pondered over *Kitaabon Mein Billi Ne Bachhe Diye Hain*, is a literary treat for all.

Saxena's prominence lies in his unmatched skills of absurd extrapolation of ideas and yet almost always serving a sociological angle. The prime examples are his poems 'Basant', wherein a butterfly sits on a branch reading newspaper, which subsequently reminds me of Roy Andersson's absurd masterpiece 'A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence'; 'Nanha Dhruvtara' exposing philosophy of life with lines like—'कहना, जिसने ठोकर खाई / वही बना नन्हा ध्रुवतारा' (say, the one who stumbled / became the little pole star); '*Bandook*' being an ambassador for universal peace with its powerful juxtaposition of weapons and them being transformed into water guns to colour the whole world. And needless to say, Saxena's timeless masterpieces like '*Batoota Ka Joota*', '*Naani Ka Gulkand*' and the like also make the cut in this wonderful compilation.

As for the illustrations, Debabrat Ghosh has done a fair job. The illustrations are quirky, witty, comical and colourful. They support the poems quite well and exceptionally stand alone as well. However, I feel they fall a little short in keeping pace with Saxena's unmatched skill of extrapolation, as stated earlier. Where on one hand, Saxena's poems challenge the readers to expound the limits of their imagination, Debabrat's illustrations, on the other hand, come as somewhat unchallenging to me. But the design of the book, especially the borders of the pages, filled with beautiful collages, is just the wonderful, wonderful creativity of Debabrat.

The production quality of the book is just top-notch. The children can play with the book, without it being torn to shreds. This 40 pages long book gives ample space to 21 poems, without any one of them feeling claustrophobic. At ₹130, the book may seem overpriced to a major chunk of the readers.

All in all, *Kitaabon Mein Billi Ne Bachhe Diye Hain* is a must read for all those little-big humans who love *Kitaab, Billi, Bachhe* and life.



Asfia Jamal and Kaniska

AGAR MAGAR
By Gulzar. Illustrations: Allen Shaw
Jugnoo, 2022, pp. 130, ₹ 325.00

The illustrative children's book by Gulzar and Shaw opens a pandora's box of curious questions and intriguing/thought-provoking responses. The book is a collection of Gulzar's column 'Agar-magar' in *Chakmak* (the monthly children's magazine published by Eklavya) and is enriched by illustrations by Allen Shaw. The dialogic writing style combines poetic overtones, opening up new avenues to fuel children's curiosity to know more, to know better.

Spread across 130 pages, the short conversations and the illustrations take us into the inquisitive, creative, and eccentric young minds. Through the display of children's curious, deep and philosophical questions, the book engages with the relentless quest of children to explore the world. Gulzar's spontaneous and witty responses not only lead to new, fresh perspectives but sometimes also steer deeper questions. However, at places, they do not match the depth of the questions asked by children and rely much on abstract and metaphysical way of talking. For example, the question हर एक फूल अलग–अलग रंग और खुशबू का कैसे हो जाता है? (How is each flower of a different colour and fragrance?) is a question based on deep observation of nature and surroundings by the child. However, the response from the poet to this question appears to be light-hearted, almost frivolous. If we were the child asking this question, we would have felt irritated for the question to be taken so lightly.

On another page a child asks about ghosts, if they exist and if the poet has seen any. This is a very important question which not just children, but humans in general are interested in, but the response of Gulzar confirms the presence of some supernatural—albeit in a light-hearted manner. It would have been interesting if this response could have led children (and in fact all readers of the book) to deeper questioning instead of confirming something.

The magazine column, and now the book, have however, undertaken an impressive quest of highlighting the curiosity and creativeness through which children question, engage and indeed illuminate the most bizarre yet fundamental aspects of life and living.

The creative marriage of concepts within the book can leave children, adolescents and adults bewildered with the scope of the yet unexplored. At many places, we were moved by the relevance in imagining alternate learning methods hinged on children's peculiar lines of questioning, which are often side-lined in mainstream and adult conversations.

In this book, questions are what might interest readers more and also lead children to foray deeper into the world of questions. But when it comes to announcing the writer of the book, only Gulzar's name is prioritized and given on the cover. Also, the fact that this is a collection of what appeared as 'Agar-Magar' columns should have been mentioned at the beginning instead of at the end for readers to have more connection with the context.

Lastly, even though the quality of the pages and cover is satisfactory, the book is priced towards a higher range with not very impressive illustrations.

Alizia Kumail

IDGAH

By Premchand. Edited by Bharat Tripathi and Seema. Illustrations: Mayukh Ghosh. Design: Kanak Shashi

Eklavya, 2022, pp. 28, ₹ 55.00

In life, we stumble upon stories of many kinds — stories that terrify us, stories that entertain us, stories that make us cry, stories that make us love. The entire world is just an amalgamation of stories, in the form of books, art, people, music. Some stories, however, leave an indelible mark on us. They inflict an emotion so profound upon us that we may spend our entire lives attempting to describe their impact and only fail. *Idgah* remains one of those stories for me. Premchand succeeds in adding such depth to quite a simple narrative, employing a child's innocence and point of view most often to do so. One is left marvelling at the author's ability to make you feel so much. Very few short stories can come close to hitting you like a brick wall the way *Idgah* does, urging me to draw comparisons with O. Henry's *The Last Leaf* and *The Gift of the Magi.* There is a degree of purity and sheer unadulterated human kindness and love in these stories that reminds you of the beauty in the world amidst its ugliness.

The narrative of this story holds a high degree of sincerity, owing to it revolving around five-year old orphan Hamid and his going to the Id mela with a meagre amount of money after the ritual prayers of Eid. There is an innate innocence and kindness in a five-year old child that no circumstance, not his orphan status, nor his poverty can steal which is depicted beautifully every time we get a glimpse of Hamid's inner dialogue, his acceptance of the explanation he has been given of his parents' demise, his faith in Allah, his love for his grandmother, Amina. Premchand portrays the young characters in the story very unassumingly, which is especially entertaining since it is not from the point of view of an adult looking at a child, minimizing their thoughts and feelings; rather, when you are reading the children's interactions you feel as if you are a child yourself, immersed in the psyche of the children, the urge to brag, the need to have the best toy, the constant light unmalicious jealousy and grudging admiration for others' possessions.

Often marketed as a story for children, I believe *Idgah* is just as much a lesson in compassion for adults and the power they hold over the children who love them. Amina is taken aback when she realizes how Hamid—instead of getting something small for himself—has sought to please her, a deeply poignant moment in the story. One also finds a strong underlying theme of faith. Despite the dreariness of the circumstances, the lack of money, the death of Hamid's parents, neither Amina nor Hamid express the slightest bitterness or lack of faith in God or the world. One notices a loud absence of cynicism despite there existing space for much, adding to the wholesomeness of the story. The new illustrations added by Mayukh Ghosh add greatly to the narrative and one succeeds in visualizing the fair while reading the story. I found the choice of illustrating every broken toy of the other boys particularly hilarious.

Despite being a story with many dark and unfortunate elements in the protagonist's situation, *Idgah* leaves you with a strong sense of hope and optimism about the world. If Hamid can show so much love and compassion, why can't we? Our circumstances have begun to rule us, and this story shows how it could be if we chose to separate ourselves from our circumstances for a few moments. *Idgah* has stood the test of time and I believe will continue to do so for generations to come. It will forever remain a warm cup of hot chocolate on a winter evening, inspiring us to be just a little more kind to the person in front of us.

Teji Grover

WOH PED PAR CHALTI HAI

By Sushil Shukla. Illustrations: Allen Shaw

Jugnoo, 2022, pp. 24, ₹ 50.00

As parents and teachers we often wonder how to initiate children into environmental awareness and of the fragile world they have been born to inhabit. We often wonder if we can talk about climate change with small children, or if there's a way of letting them in on the wise use of resources to lessen its impact. It's not an easy job to undertake as it involves abstract thinking and the ability to make cause and effect connections, something in which we, as adults, who have brought them to this threatened world have miserably failed.

This tiny book in a square format and thick paper, tries to repair

the short-circuit in human imagination with the anguished utterance of a poet committed passionately to the well-being of children facing a dark world. In a way it's a book for all of us that tries this through its apparently simple strategy of connecting the felling of a tree with the felling of air, water, colour and earth, eroding the magical and fragile earth beneath our feet. Allen Shaw's breathtaking paintings (the different elements portrayed whole one by one facing pages) carry fragments of the poem, as if the act of splitting a poem itself were symbolic of the violence in question. The poem in order for it to have any impact requires the kind of thinking the lack of which has inspired the text. Is the writer aware he has laid his finger on a Catch 22 situation?

The connection between book-production in general, the lavish use of paper and eco-unfriendly resources in the printing industry suddenly assume critical proportions while reading this particular book. I'm sure that both Sushil Shukla and Allen Shaw must have been troubled by the thought of 'cognitive dissonance', a price worth paying, perhaps, for hoping for a resource conscious book industry. I was reminded of a book in which the German writer Janosch reversed fairy-tales for a double-edged and hilarious 'political correctness'. On the flap he said something to the effect that it's a tree-carcass the reader is holding in her/his hands!

Anjali Noronha

MIRCHI KA CHOORA
By Bama. Illustrations: Karen Haydock. Translated from the original Tamil by Rama Vedula.
Muskaan, 2021, pp. 20, ₹ 180.00

JUNGLE KISKA
By Samita Uikey. Illustrations: Puja Sahu
Muskaan, 2021, pp. 12, ₹ 60.00

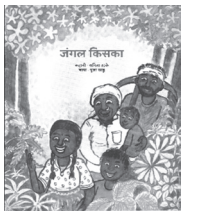
MITTI
By Madhu Dhurvey. Illustrations: Ubitha Leela Unni
Muskaan, 2021, pp. 12, ₹ 70.00

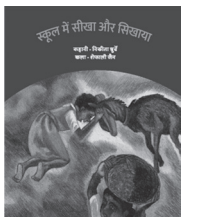
SCHOOL MEIN SEEKHA AUR SIKHAYA
By Nikita Dhurvey. Illustrations: Shefalee Jain
Muskaan, 2022, pp. 12, ₹ 70.00

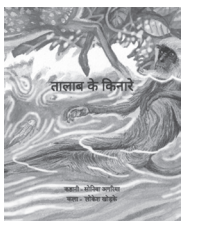
TALAAB KE KINARE
By Soniya Agariya. Illustrations: Lokesh Khodke
Muskaan, 2022, pp. 12, ₹ 70.00

These five endearing books published by Muskaan, Bhopal break new ground in more ways than one. For one, all of them are written by tribal and Dalit girls and women. Secondly, three out of the five—*Taalaab ke Kinare, School Mein Seekha aur Sikhaya, Jungle Kiska* are written by young girls in their teens. *Mitti* is a story written by Madhu Dhurve as a young adult, about her childhood. *Mirchi ka Choora* is written by renowned dalit writer Bama.

All these stories have two things in common, they depict the work lives of the deprived and conflicts with adults or with socio-political processes. Secondly, the reflections on these conflicts or their resolutions depict a world view of nonviolent coexistence, an important part of the world view of tribal cultures.







Taalab ke Kinaare is a heart-rending animal story about the violent disruption caused in the lives of animals by so-called human development. The lake and the jungle offer solace to the animals in such disruptive times. This is typical of the tribal world where all nature is part of an interconnected whole. Simple language has been effectively used to convey complex emotions of sadness, worry and despondence.

The visuals complete the story; the context of development disruption may get missed out if the visuals are not looked at carefully. The animals' faces truly depict their worries! The illustrations are across two facing pages and have been skillfully done and carefully aligned in the binding, no mean feat.

The end can be seen as a metaphor for the precarious lives of tribal migrants, settled at the margins of a city. Overall, a deep book experience that requires sensitive handling by the teacher for it's potential to be fully realized.

Jungle Kiska is the story of a temporary migrant worker family who work on brick kilns. Such work contexts are usually not available to most child readers. The story has suspense and excitement as the family eats and sleeps in the jungle on their way to work. When a snake emerges in the eerie darkness of the night, time seems to stand still. The story ends in a way in which both the people and the snake survive, with the moot question 'Whose is the jungle?'

The illustrations are colourful but not as impactful. The design is four colour illustration on the left page and text on the right. The single colour illustrations added under the text on the right seem to distract and not add value.

Mitti is the story of a little girl called Mitti who loves washing clothes with her mother and playing in the water at the handpump. The name Mitti is intriguing and exposes the reader to a different culture; it is good that other children are exposed to it too. Children playing in the water, including Mitti are shooed away by a man for making a mess, which makes Mitti sad. The mother devises a plan to make up to Mitti. The caring relationship between mother and daughter is heartwarming.

The illustrations and layout experiment with a very different style of perspectives through legs and boxes with hints of what they could be. A very good book for visual literacy.

School Mein Seekha aur Sikhaya is a book that deals with the almost universal experience of children not understanding what is being taught in school because of the difference between home language and school language. They are also bothered as the teacher neglects them because of her bias that children from deprived backgrounds are dumb! The children who want to continue their studies but are finding it hard to cope, hatch an interesting plan that highlights the need for multilingualism.

The illustrations are evocative and show both the home and school contexts and the minds of the children through their expressions.

Mirchi ka Choora (Milagaipodi) is a book for mature readers, culled out from Bama's story collection. It is the story of a Dalit woman who repeatedly challenges an oppressive landlady who is caricatured through the eyes of Pachayamma. She gets caught in one such episode but is undaunted by what ensues. The story showcases the constant conflict between Dalits and upper caste landowners in

raw language. The narrative, however, is slow and holds the attention of the reader with difficulty. Perhaps the problem could be in the translation; it may be more evocative and gripping in its Tamil rendition.

Karen's illustrations are powerful. She has a style of her own, a keen observation evident in the nuances of postures and expressions.

This set of books is a much-needed contribution to plural perspectives in children's literature. They make the voices of the otherwise invisible people come out in the public space. These voices have much to offer, both to other marginalized children as well as those from other backgrounds. Whereas the former can relate to the stories on a personal level, it is very important that the latter are also exposed to other lives and other world views. For others to appreciate these, a sensitive facilitator would be necessary, the socialization of the privileged often biases them against those who are not so privileged as well as to resistance.

Except for Bama, all these girls have been educated in the Muskaan school, which not only teaches the children of extremely deprived ragpicker communities school subjects, it also struggles with them and their communities to make a respectable space in order that such children may find their voice and their vocation. A multilingual education programme in three languages, their own (Gondi/Pardhi), Hindi and English, Muskaan goes a long way in strengthening the expression of these children. It has started publishing their stories in both Hindi and English in order to give these children a wider readership. These books definitely enrich the world of children's literature.

Nitika Meena

JISKE PAAS CHALI GAI MERI ZAMEEN
By Naresh Saxena. Illustrations: Kavita Singh Kale
Jugnoo, 2021, pp. 16, ₹ 50.00

Jiske Paas Chali Gai Meri Zameen is a book with a vibrant cover and a heavy title. The book introduces us to a family of farmers (wife, husband, daughter and son) who are enjoying the rains. After the rains, the family can be seen involved in the farming work. The couple are ploughing the field while the children are playing in the fields surrounded by various animals and insects. As the crop grows the father and daughter can be seen around the field and happily enjoying the process. Now the crop is ready to be harvested. The family is celebrating the same by dancing and *pooja.*

When the next rain arrives, the family have lost their land and the couple is looking at rains from their window. One feels as if they are jailed inside and are left with no reason to enjoy the rain. They talk about all the good things that come with rains and how all of this is for people who have land. All the festivals, songs, dances, water, clouds, everything is for people with land. The family has lost hope as farming was their primary source of income. They can't even borrow money with a promise that they'll repay the same during the harvesting season.

Both the husband and wife are shown carrying out the farm work equally. Unlike real life, we do not see anyone's work being shown as more important than the other's. When they lose their land, the impact too is felt by both equally, and then by the children.

The title of the book made me curious to read what it has to offer. Kavita Singh Kale's illustrations are simple and speak volumes about the story. The initial story is depicted in visuals, without text and all the major steps of farming and emotions associated with it are well depicted. Later, the poetry and visuals merge together to carry the narrative ahead.

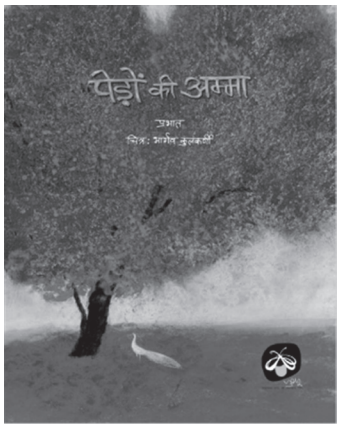
While reading the book, I was also thinking of the various ways by which I can use this with children in a classroom or a learning situation—we can talk about the various steps of farming, which animals/insects/birds they can see, the importance of land in people's lives and what is lost when they lose the same. They can also be encouraged to talk about how the family might have lost their land.

The book leaves us with a question about the circumstances under which the family lose their land as it was their only source of income.

I enjoyed reading the book and am excited to take the same to children.

Parul Batra Duggal

PEDON KI AMMA
By Prabhat. Illustrations: Bhargav Kulkarni
Jugnoo, 2022, pp. 72, ₹ 215.00



This beautiful book presents a collection of 66 poems by the noted Hindi poet Prabhat. It doesn't rain as much in the whole of Rajasthan as it does in the book *Pedon ki Amma*, neither do the winds blow as much as it blows in *Pedon ki Amma*. You never see as many clouds floating as you see in the book, and nor are there so many animals anywhere as are in *Pedon ki Amma*.

It feels as though Prabhat woke up one morning, took in all the sights of the village, and then wrote this book. The weather, the farm and barn, the bushes, carts, animals, children, adults—all are encompassed in the book. As you read, you can feel the farm tracks, the rain, the breeze, sun, dew drops, winter and summer, darkness and light on your way. You sway with the lions and elephants in the jungle, unlock the worlds of ants and spiders with them.

The kind of imagery and metaphors Prabhat brings to life with his quill is rarely seen in children's literature. Every poem offers itself for a discussion with children from various standpoints. There are very few instances in the available children's poetry where you find an opportunity to discuss the said as well as the unsaid. A few glimpses are the poem '*Cheenikhor*' with its sarcastic jibe on the rulers, or the comment on how society treats its elders in the poem '*Ramzan Miya*'. This treasure-trove of poems is an invaluable resource.

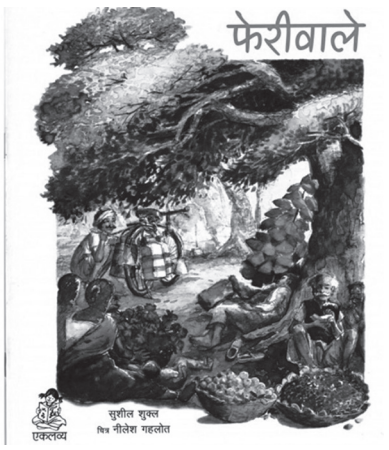
The choice of topics are also very unique. For instance, there is a poem titled '*Chalti Hui Pahadi*' where an elephant has been imagined as a moving hill, a bridge, the village lanes and what not! Elephants, tigers, wolves, cockerels and fish—they are all subjects in this poetic

study. The poems allow children to take a flight of imagination. The play with language is also very attractive where one can witness the adept weaving of local as well as English words together that add to the fun element. An example is: *Chidiya ne ek Sunday, ghonsle mein diye ande, Illi ne suit pehna, khatmal ne boot pehna, Gmail ke dabbe mein postcard daalkar, saanp ke mobile mein recharge daalkar…* Some poems illustrate a fantastic use of rhyme, as in *'Kutka Butka'*, *'Bheege Re'* or *'Mubaraq'*.

Bhargav Kulkarni's water colour illustrations add colour, water and beauty to the poems.

Jaya Krishnamachari

PHERIWALE
By Sushil Shukla. Illustrations: Nilesh Gehlot
Eklavya, 2022, pp.8, ₹ 55.00



Pheriwale is a poem by Sushil Shukla written for young ones and published by Eklavya, Bhopal. The book has very nice illustrations on each page by Nilesh Gehlot. When children see these pictures while reading each verse, they will be able to relate to and understand the poem better. Shukla has written a number of poems, stories and short pieces of prose for children that have been published by Eklavya, Ektara, Pratham, Room to Read, NCERT and UNICEF.

The topic the author has chosen for this poem is an interesting one. With the advent of Super Bazars and Malls, where you can shop for all your requirements, *pheriwalas*/hawkers are fast disappearing. You do find hawkers on the pavements selling their wares in big cities, but the ones carrying their goods in baskets on their heads and going round streets are fast becoming a rarity. In smaller towns and rural areas, we do see vegetables, fruits etc., being sold thus. This poem describes how a *pheriwala* goes from house to house selling fruits, spices or other things, trying to entice the buyers, showing them a fruit, extolling its great qualities and in the end selling his wares to them. When one sees a *pheriwala* daily, unknowingly, a personal bond also develops between the buyers and the seller. If for some reason our regular *pheriwala* fails to appear on any one day, we start to wonder about the reasons for his absence; and when he finally turns up, we are more than relieved to see him back. In earlier times no one would have given a second thought to these regular hawkers because they were an integral part of society. In modern times, most children may not even have heard the name *'Pheriwale'*. So, it is good to read Shukla's poem about them. I am sure children residing in the metros will be curious to read about the *Pheriwalas* and their art of selling. Nilesh Gehlot has to be commended for the imaginative and beautiful illustrations he has done for the book. Children would certainly enjoy reading or being read to by an adult.

Chandra Prakash Kada

BOLI RANGOLI
By Gulzar. Illustrations: Allen Shaw
Jugnoo, 2022, pp. 60, ₹ 175.00

Gulzar is an artist who has worked in many mediums, and is yet always searching for his own medium. Apart from being an experienced script and dialogue writer, he has been writing some fine literature for children. When you read the book under review, *Boli Rangoli*, you get to experience a Gulzar of a very different mood. One that stops to listen to children, and learn from them, as much or more than what he has to offer to them. The illustrations of Allen Shaw match the mood by bringing in the complementary element of flow and fluidity.

The book presents before us many allegories and emotions. At times the images may appear unrelated, but stop to reflect on everyday life in the light of these lines and images– and you will find the connections. For instance, in the lines, *'Saal chadhne ka zeena hai, paaon mein pehla maheena hai.'* Human life is all wrapped up around the months. The entire universe is constantly trying to find its dreams and imaginations in the dates of the year of a calendar. That is why Gulzar has metaphorized life like a year.

At another place he writes:

'इक पेड़ है जिससे एक ही पत्ता	There's a tree from which only one leaf
रोज जमी पर गिरता है,	Falls to the earth every day,
सदियों से ये रीत है उसकी	This has been its way since centuries
गिरता है तब खिलता है।	It blooms when it falls.

At first sight these may appear to be ordinary words woven into sentences. But it is no mean feat to imagine life and time-cycle as a tree and endorse the fact that only when one leaf of a day falls, only then the next day blooms. He sees the day as the leaf of a tree, one day ends and the other begins; one leaf falls and the other blooms.

At another place he writes:

भरी रहती है अन्दर से	It remains full inside
कलम मुहँ बन्द रखती है,	The pen keeps its mouth closed
मगर सब बोल देती है	But it says it all
वो जब कागज़ को चखती है।'	When it tastes the paper.

Here, he seems to be talking about the atmosphere and desire to express. He is acknowledging that fact that everyone has a lot to say, to share, but what is there in our minds only comes out when we find the right atmosphere (the paper here) and right people–those who can hold what we have to say, just as the paper holds the ink forms.

It is only Gulzar who can weave such everyday things of minute observation into simple words and deep-meaning metaphors. The *Boli Rangoli* book is a wonderful collection of many such thought-provoking verses written in a new style that will encourage children to read, observe things around them and reflect. It weaves in many everyday experiences of children and nudges them to think beyond what is on the surface and take both a dive into the deeper layers as well as a leap into the high skies of imagination. And that too through very simple words.

Lata Sangade and Shivani Taneja

MERA PANNA (SET OF CARDS)
By various children
Eklavya, 2022, set of 8 cards, ₹ 50.00

As you all may be aware, *Chakmak* is a children's monthly magazine published by Eklavya regularly since 1985. It has a column named '*Mera Panna*' (My pages) that carries stories, poems, articles and drawings by children. We can see the myriad abilities of children in this column, and children too can find themselves in these pages. This set of 8 cards is a selection from this vast treasure, and have been presented as one special card each.

'*Aasmaan Mein Chidiya*' is a poem by Khushi studying in class 8 where we can see brevity of words that have been set to a rhythm. In another card '*Mera Bus ka Number*' the child has used colloquial words like '*gyara-pukara*', '*jaati-karaati*' beautifully, and with elan! The rhyme '*cycle*' has a good meter and also raises the serious issue of gender discrimination in the voice of a girl. Here, Pooja Verma of class 9 writes on social discrimination based on gender with sharpness and comments on how, often, girls are deprived from fulfilling their dreams and heartfelt desires. '*Akhir Kyon*' is a very-short story written by Arti in 2010 which builds on the element of suspense and prods you to keep reading. The author has also written about an animal in her surroundings, which reflects her sensitiveness.

However, there are some cards which do not stand out as special. The set of 8 cards also do not seem to have any connecting link. Three cards are about birds, two tell us about the relationship between humans and animals, two touch the world of cycles and one is on the experiences during a bus ride.

Azadi ki Nukti, Pyara Laddu are some examples from the thirteen book publications Eklavya has so far published that try to give a new life to children's writing from the *'Mera Panna'* column. Only few writings have been selected from such a rich treasure trove for making this set of cards. In this scenario, there should have been some clear selection criteria – which does not come across by only seeing the cards.

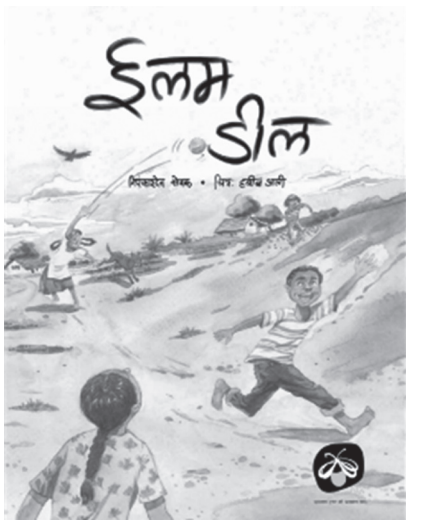
In some cards, children's drawing bring the story or poem to life. Like Sahil's drawing on the '*Kadhi Patta*' card, Gopal's 'Cycle' clearly show their minute observation and a hold on the medium of art. Where the mood of the writing is enhanced by the drawing, they make a perfect match, as in the story *'Khacchar'* and both the cycle stories. But in some places this correlation is not coming through, like in '*Aasmaan Mein Chidiya*'.

'Mera Panna' is a platform for children's expressions and is a commendable effort. However, question arises that are we not taking children's writings seriously and selecting them on standards of quality for publishing? A beautiful publication is made by its writing, art and production. The visuals selected for these cards are on their own, all beautiful. However, the selection of text to place with them and the choice of paper is being questioned here. The paper used for different cards is of different kind. Having different paper for cards of a single set does raise the question are we treating children's writings lightly to have allowed this.

Critical comments apart, these cards can be very useful in the classroom. We can borrow an idea from these texts and talk about the situation for which '*Akhir Kyon*' is searching an answer. We can discuss with children what they do not like about the world around them and which answer would they like to ask of the world. Also, when a child reads/sees the work of another child, she can also be enthused and motivated to express herself and believe that there is a writer and/or artist within each of us. Teachers and adults can take the help of these cards to nurture these very writers and artists.

Melody Xalxo

EELAM DEEL
By Nirankardev Sevak. Illustrations: Habib Ali
Jugnoo, 2022, pp. 60, ₹ 160.00



Here's another collection of poems by Nirankardev Sevak — poems that you will find many a child singing along while doing chores or playing with odds and ends in the rural stretches of north India. The poems have been read and sung since ages— in school, at home and out in the playgrounds with rhythm and joy. In today's fast-moving times of modernity where even children are often closeted within four walls, poems like these bring back the fragrance of the soil. They bring nature to us and also pave the way for bringing education of the child close to nature. They encompass everything in the environ: animals, birds, trees and plants, insects, games played indoors and outdoors, our wants, food, the village and the town… And they are able to make a direct connection with the inner world of the child reader.

The poems are not only fun, they have imagination and creativity. They help children play with language, explore and experience it with a sense of ownership and friendliness, and learn along the way. Some poems in this collection also open out the realities of life and give a nudge to think about them with tenderness—trying to make children sensitive, curious, inquisitive and enthusiastic.

The use of rhyme in Sevak's poems is amazing. The lilt works on you as you read, and you cannot but stop from swaying with the rhythm! No wonder children love these poems. Figures of speech too add to the beauty of the language.

Some of the poems (like *'Murgi Ma'*, *'Chooha Bola'*, *'Machhar Bola'*, *'Billi Ke Ghar Billi'*) use personification to attract children's attention to simple everyday acts of humans, but deep within they also connect with human emotions related to these acts. It could make children think whether these actions and emotions may also be a part of the animal world. On the other hand, poems like '*Nadi Mein Aag*', '*Kitabon Ke Keede*', '*Humse Kyon Kahte?*', '*Kitna Achraj Hai!*' help children ponder about things around them in a logical manner and try to build cause-effect thinking in them.

'बादल कब किससे कहते हैं
छप्पर या खपरैल न छाओ?
फिर हम से ही सब क्यों कहते
यह मत करना, वह कर लाओ
यहाँ न जाओ, वहाँ न जाओ
यह बन जाओ, वह बन जाओ'?

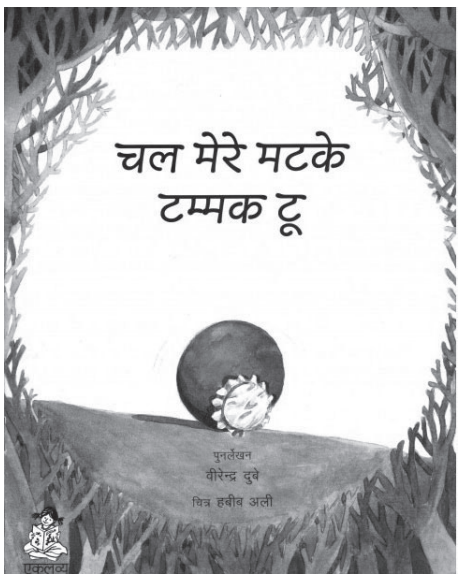
This stanza from the poem 'हमसे क्यों कहते' ('*Humse Kyon Kahte?*'), presented on the back cover of the book, is a powerful voice that stands with children as they ask for their freedom, and protest about all the Do's and Don'ts imposed on them. Children are often treated as 'less' in our society, and their curiosity addressed with comments like 'you are a kid now', 'you will know when you grow up', etc. However, in the poem 'Jyotishi', the poet not only has a young boy question the astrologer, but also force all the readers to stop and think about the veracity of astrology itself.

The illustrations in the book are quite open, carry a sense of freedom in them, and add to the poetic feel. I particularly liked the one on page 36, with the girl flying with the winds! And the one on page 26 ('Sadkein') with the yellow taxis that transported me to Kolkata! And also in page 34 ('Postman') that has a young woman doing the job! The cover illustration paints bit of a romantic image of a village, with open fields, animals grazing and children playing—a rare sight nowadays even in the rural stretches. Some illustrations create a cognitive dissonance (as on page 16, 28) just like the poems they are illustrating do and add more to it.

This book is a must-read for children, but also an essential companion for all teachers, librarians and educators. It can open up conversations of many kinds and shades with children anywhere.

Jaya Krishnamachari

CHAL MERE MATKE TUMMAK TU
By Virendra Dubey. Illustrations: Habib Ali, Design: Kanak Shashi
Eklavya, 2022, pp. 8, ₹ 50.00



Chal Mere Matke Tammak Tu is a folktale that Virendra Dubey has reconstructed for young readers. At some stage in our childhood, I am sure many of us might have heard the story, maybe different versions of it, from parents or grandparents. It is an interesting tale of how an old lady outwits the wild animals who want to eat her while she is crossing the forest to go and visit her daughter who lives in a far-off town. The author has narrated the story in a way that children would find very entertaining. The story starts with an invitation from a daughter to her mother to come and visit her. Then the whole drama starts. The old woman sets out to see her daughter but while crossing the forest to get to the town, she is chased by different wild animals, all hungry and waiting to make a meal of her. Once at her daughter's place she is happy, but as the time approaches for her departure she is also worried about how to escape from the animals waiting for her return as promised by her.

The story goes on to tell the readers how brain can win over brawn. Her daughter, being very clever, gives her an idea that sees her safely through her journey back to her house near the forest. The author has also shown how presence of mind can help avert any danger that might befall a person. '*Chal Mere Matke Tammak Tu*' proves the mantra that ferries the old woman across the forest. Saying anything more would be giving away the story, so I will leave it to the children to read it and enjoy the thrill and suspense in the story. Parents can read out the story to children who may not be old enough to read it themselves. I remember my husband telling my son a story about a cow and a tiger when he was just 3 or 4 years old. However, many times he heard the story my son would still feel excited to hear it. This story is also one such, since most children love listening to tales involving human beings and animals. A story book that would be a good buy for the very young.

Virendra Dubey has been a tireless worker in the field of children's literature, art and education with a number of his poems and stories being published in Children's magazines like *Chakmak, Cycle, Pluto* and others. He has published a book of poems *Char Chatore* for kids. He lives in Indore, Madhya Pradesh. The imaginative illustrations by Habib Ali make the story come alive and inviting.

Tanaya Soni

DUNIYA MERI
By Gulzar. Illustrations: Duniya Freida Shaw and Allen Shaw
Jugnoo, 2022, pp. 40, ₹ 160.00

The book *Duniya Meri* is an emotional journey of the love that a father and daughter cherish. A timeless tale that has been described with both words and illustrations, it aims to address how, for a father, the daughter is his world. It portrays how little things, little moments shared between them are everything that matters for their happiness.

The poem forms a rhythmic pattern versed through couplets. To me, the format of poetry chosen by the author really works well as what he wants to say is conveyed in very few words but with great depth of meaning. In that sense, the choice of the words and sentencing of the verse is commendable. The author creates comparisons and metaphors of the daughter that the father describes as his Duniya (world), with nature. The theme of the poem flows through these comparisons such as '*Roye toh samundar utha leti hai*', '*Abshar lagta hai baarish ki jhadi hai*' among many others. The comparison of the little girl with the entire world or Duniya is another interesting trope used by the poet. He repeats the lines '*Chhoti si Duniya meri itni badi hai*' reiterating how much the little girl is to him, how she is so small yet has the capacity to be his world or even how his world revolves around her. This contrast of having the daughter described through juxtaposition is something that deepens the essence of the poem and certainly reaches the readers,

giving them an in depth understanding of a father's unconditional love for his daughter.

Similarly, the free-flowing paintings aptly describe the couplets along with little scribbles to identify with the character of the little girl in the poem. The paintings bring life to the theme of the poem and portray an imagery of how the father's life is colourful because of the daughter, that if she cries, its blue but when she laughs she can be the rainbow. It can even be said that if one were not able to read the text of the book, the illustrations would be enough to convey what the words describe.

In all, I believe the book has the potential to stir up emotions in the reader, which it personally did for me, justifying the excellent wordplay of Gulzar in narrating stories along with Shaw's illustrations.

Apoorva Raje

AKELI CHEENTI

By Chandan Yadav. Illustrations: Srinivas Balkrishna
Jugnoo, 2022, pp. 12, ₹ 35.00

Akeli Cheenti is a picture book exploring the journey of an ant, a bit different from what we have observed all ants doing.

This ant is a rebellious one and wants to explore the world and so begins her lone journey where she experiences life threatening and dangerous ordeals. The sweet taste of freedom and new experiences start with the giving up of the temptation of her favourite food! But who would ever fathom that a herd of beautiful deer can be life threatening?

The style of illustration is Warli-like. Use of just the two colours, brown and white, makes one feel that they are on this journey with the ant on the dusty ground. The dotted lines, which later turn into ants, take you through the book which also makes you flip the book upside down. The text has also been placed upside down. An experiment with design which initially feels a bit much but on several readings is quite fun. I think children will love this a lot. The detailed illustrations of the ant producing eggs which then turn into ants and the cockroach are awe-inspiring.

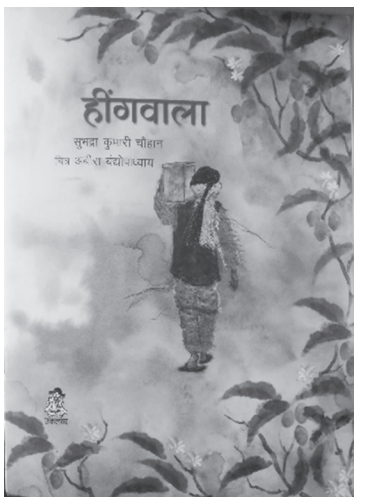
I feel this picture book is as much for adults as it is for children. A tiny book about tiny creatures, the ants, fit for the picture book lovers' collection.

The paper used, production quality and printing is of good quality and the latter can be judged on the basis of the different shades of earthy colour easily visible.

Aruna Patel

HEENGWALA

By Subhadra Kumari Chauhan. Illustrations: Abeera Bandopadhyay
Eklavya, 2021, pp. 12, ₹ 40.00



This is a short story by Subhadra Kumari Chauhan about the friendship between Afghan traders and the local buyers. This reminds us of 'Kabuliwala', a story by Rabindranath Tagore.

In an era gone by individual traders from Afghanistan would come to India to sell their goods from house to house. In this case, it is *heeng*. These traders or hawkers miss their home and children, whom they had left behind. They become friendly with the locals, find some solace in their company. A comradery exists between them.

The *Heengwala* insists that the lady of the house Savitri buy the *heeng*. He believes that it was auspicious for him if she is the first buyer in the morning. Savitri knowing his sentiments buys *heeng* and gives him thirty-five paise. The children of the house are against this transaction because they are jealous of him. They want something for thirty-five paise too. When Savitri asks, the Afghan gives her *heeng*, what would they give her in return for the money.

Many months pass, the *Heengwala* does not turn up. During that period, riots take place in the town. Savitri is worried about his well-being. Khan had gone back to his home in Afghanistan and comes back after several days. Savitri asks him, 'Aren't you afraid to come to our house?' Khan replies, 'Are your sons afraid of you? Then why should I be?'.

Savitri's children want to go for Dussehra festivities. She is unwilling to let them go as their father is out of town and she does not want them to go unescorted. She agrees reluctantly to send them with the household help who offers to take them to see the procession and promises to bring them back soon.

Again, there are riots in the town. The children are unable to return till late that night. Savitri is very worried. But then Khan comes bringing the children with him. He admonishes Savitri not to send the children out in such conditions of unrest.

The story is about the affection, care, attachment and comradery between the hawkers, whether they are *Heengwala* or Kabuliwala and the local residents.

Subhadra Kumari Chauhan is a household name. One of her best-known poems '*Khoob Ladi Mardani Woh Jhansiwali Rani thi*' is to be found in most of the Hindi textbooks.

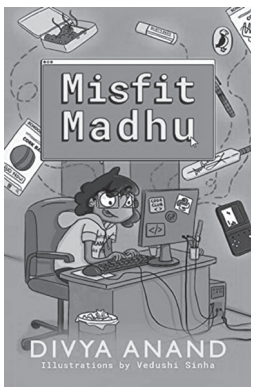
The drawings by Abeera Bandopadhyay and the book-design by Ishita Debnath Biswas are both eye catching and attractive.

Toolika Wadhwa

MISFIT MADHU

By Divya Anand. Illustrations: Vedushi Sinha

Puffin Books, 2022, pp. 277, ₹ 299.00



In *Misfit Madhu*, Anand has narrated the tale of a grade 7 student, Madhu, who has a penchant for coding. She develops an app that helps school students swap their belongings. The story goes on to talk about the mini adventures of Madhu in the ensuing months. In narrating this tale, the storyline covers many dimensions of the psychosocial world of contemporary pre-teens.

Madhu and her classmates present a heterogeneous mix that is the hallmark of all middle school classrooms, where varied interests and habits make each student unique. What makes one who one is, and how does one find it? This is also the point of convergence for much of what is covered in the book. Madhu and her friends are at the cusp of embarking on a journey that would help them consolidate the various dimensions of their identities. From discovering their interests, to labelling and naming each other on the basis of their physical features or personalities, pre-teens in this book are on a constant endeavour to make sense of the world around them and finding their unique space in it.

This quest is also characterized by a need for recognition and validation from significant others. This includes parents, teachers, and most importantly, peers. However, in contemporary times, that are marked by a plethora of media platforms that allows people to showcase their work and participate in competitions organized by corporates, the expectation of validation has expanded to the larger social world. Madhu is encouraged by her school principal to participate in an app development competition. In doing so, the principal provides the much-needed support for Madhu's work. Madhu's fear of being asked to focus only on studies dissipates in the light of support from her parents and school principal. The book presents an example of the role of unconditional love and support in children's growth and experimentation.

The book is written from the perspective of Madhu, and how she sees the world. The book is replete with conversations that she engages in with others and with herself. The internal monologue brings to the fore the psychosocial world of an introvert. In terms of classroom dynamics, the book shows through Madhu's eyes, the high possibility of introverts in class remaining unnoticed, despite their talents and abilities.

A recurrent theme throughout the book is that of the need for fame. This relates to validation from others through being popular in class, as high academic achievers, class clowns, the 'cool group', sports persons, computer geeks, fashionistas, and the like. Each student is trying to find her place, often wanting to be better than others. The author accepts this as a social reality, without making an attempt to promote the idea of finding self without engaging in unnecessary competition.

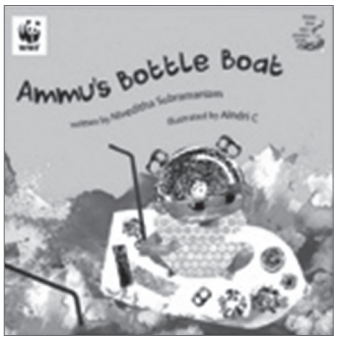
At the very outset, Madhu is shown as a young girl who cannot fit in with her family or peers. She is not popular in school and feels invisible. Many of her actions are attempts at overcoming invisibility. She is often bullied by her friends for being a misfit. Not only is she more interested in coding fashion, she is also struggling to find the right balance between her parents' beliefs and peer expectations. Madhu earns the tag 'No name Madhu', as she does not use a surname. This is because her parents believe that surnames are caste markers. Probably her parents haven't realized that their beliefs and practices are causing trouble for their daughter!

In addition to Madhu's journey of winning the app development competition, the storyline touches upon important issues of teacher-student relationship, family life style and patterns, parenting styles, relationships of pre-teens. Although suited for nine-year-olds, the book is a good read for parents and teachers as well.

AMMU'S BOTTLE BOAT

By Niveditha Subramaniam. Illustrations: Aindri C

Tulika, Chennai, 2022, pp. 36, ₹ 195.00



Ammu's Bottle Boat follows a plastic bottle boat on its way from Ammu's hands to the sea, and the guts of various animals.

Written in rhyme by Niveditha Subramaiam, the story narrates the grim reality of how plastic is ubiquitous and harmful to the world. At the end of the book is an explainer of the harms of single use plastic, and the ways to solve the problem through recycling and upcycling.

The illustrations by Aindri C are ink impression art using various everyday plastic obects, and are inspired by the Japanese style of Gyotaku—a fish printing technique that was first used by fishermen as a way to record their catch. They make the book real—with deep blues on white filling most pages, they highlight the seriousness of the issue.

Overall, the book is well-constructed, and conveys the impact of single use plastic in an engaging and absorbing manner.

Vishesh Unni Raghunathan

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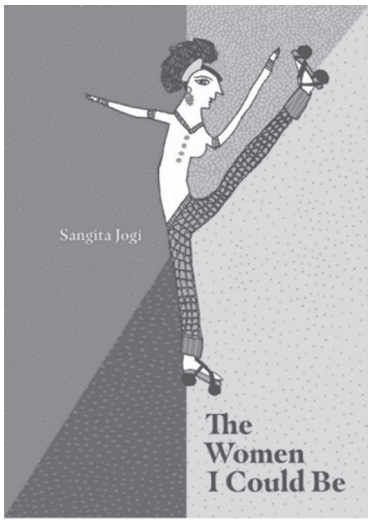
Tarika Chari

THE WOMEN I COULD BE
By Sangita Jogi
Tara Books, 2022, pp. 68, ₹ 900.00



What makes a modern woman? To Sangita Jogi, a modern woman pursues her own desires, is fashionable, and won't get married unless she has a sense of self-fulfillment. In her book, The *Women I Could Be*, Jogi explores her idea of a modern woman in the art style passed down from her parents. Every page depicts her vivid drawings and commentary, and Jogi shows how far the imagination can go even within the limits of her life.

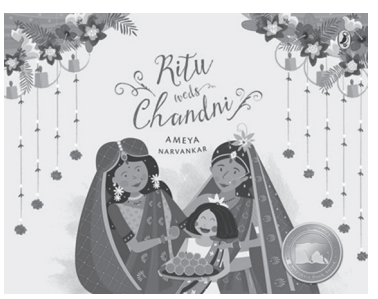
Throughout the book, Jogi shows the many possibilities of a woman, from photographers to weightlifters. She further elaborates on her image of a modern woman and her personal connections to such ideas. Accompanying the art, Jogi writes about her dreams and hobbies, including dancing. What's inspiring is that when she's faced with reality preventing her from continuing her wishes, she says, 'So what…? I can still draw women dancing.' She still finds a fulfilling and enjoyable life, an idea she writes and draws about many times throughout the book.

The book's highlight for me was the art, as all pages were incredibly detailed with a distinct style. I enjoyed looking at each page carefully, seeing all the ways women enjoyed their lives in a fulfilling way. In addition, the editors added colour, which made each page more enjoyable to view. The story behind the art is also encouraging, where I learned about the author's life and ideals and got to explore what a modern woman means to me.

I'd recommend this book to anyone who wants to be encouraged in life and realize how enjoyable it can be. It's uplifting and a joy to read. It's also a quick and easy read with basic sentence structure, so people of all ages can read it. I found this story uplifting, and I hope future readers will find it so as well.

Simran Sadh

RITU WEDS CHANDNI
By Ameya Narvankar
Puffin India, 2022, pp.36, ₹ 299.00



As soon as I read the title of the book, I felt a certain excitement about the story. The title clarified that I was picking up a challenging and unconventional theme. There exists a significant dearth of stories about LGBTQI+ characters in children's literature as it is left off as an uncomfortable topic. This gap not only denies representation to the community but also invisibilizes their struggles in everyday life which makes the theme of this book crucial.

The story of Ritu and Chandni's wedding is set in an upper-class urban Hindu set-up and is told from the worldview of Ayesha. She is excited at yet another wedding celebration in the family, that of a very dear older cousin. The two brides leading their own Baraat procession is something that Ayesha was very much looking forward to. The adults of the family are however tense and privy to a secret that Ayesha is not: the marriage is different from the other marriages of the family. Ritu, Ayesha's cousin is getting married to her partner Chandni, and as same-sex marriages are not normalized in society, this marriage is also not approved. The story is about the problems the brides face on their wedding day, for example, from relatives boycotting their wedding to the Baraat procession being attacked by an angry mob of horse riders.

Ameya, the book's author, illustrator, and a member of the LGBTQI+ community, in a note at the end of the story, shares the reason for choosing to tell the story of a lesbian couple as he believes they have more struggles and hardships than gay couples in society. However, in a genuine attempt to be fairer to the other sex, the storyline ends up basketing the struggles of all lesbian couples within one category, irrespective of their caste, class, economic background, and regional location. The illustrations of the story, which are the work of the author himself, depict the upper-class privilege of its characters which makes it difficult for a majority of the children's population to feel related to, and for those who can relate to it; it is a sanitized reality. The illustrations of the story are merely a visual depiction of the written texts and do not contribute to the story significantly. The expressions of the characters lack nuances and do not help in relating to the universe of the story.

It is also equally important to understand the opportunities for dialogue a particular text will create. In this case, the text opts to distance itself from exploring the different aspects of its characters' identity and their social positioning, of protagonists as well as antagonists. The story remains silent on the challenges faced by the queer couple and their families on ordinary days. At the same time, the story joyfully celebrates the love of Ritu and Chandni. It gives a hopeful alternative reality to its young readers by knocking at the doors of our society's orthodox belief systems; but the accessibility of the story still remains in question.

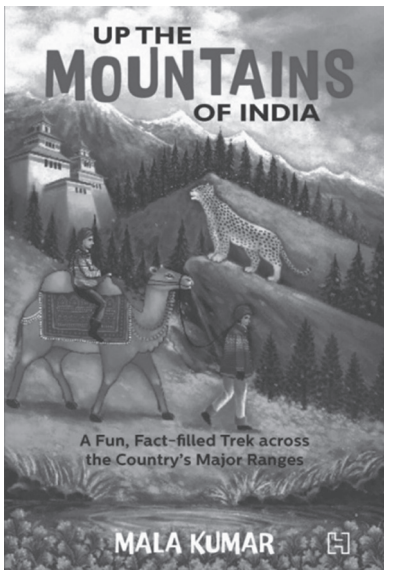
Shailaja Srinivasan

UP THE MOUNTAINS OF INDIA: A FUN, FACT-FILLED TREK ACROSS THE COUNTRY'S MAJOR RANGES
By Mala Kumar. Illustrations: Mistunee Chowdhury
Hachette, 2022, pp. 240, ₹ 499.00

Mountains have been shrouded in mystique since time immemorial. They are loved for their beauty and revered for being bountiful providers of water, food and energy. The sheer physical challenge they present to those trying to scale them commands respect! In *Up the Mountains of India*, they come alive with Mala Kumar's lucid writing!

Mala Kumar has captured India's geologically varied mountains and described their complex formation in simple jargon-free language, with examples that children can easily relate to. Explanations are animated as she writes about the people, plants

and animals that call these mountainous regions home. At the outset she sets the stage for this dramatic journey with mind-boggling timescales from the formation of the universe to the appearance of Homo Sapiens, sandwiching the formation of Aravallis, the oldest mountains, forming 1200 million years ago to the youngest—the Himalayas rising some 50 million years ago with the processes responsible for their formations depicted through simple well-labelled cartoons.



The book is replete with history of early explorations and anecdotes—I particularly enjoyed 'Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sailor', the story of the intrepid, illiterate tailor, Kinthup from Darjeeling and his ingenuous method to determine the continuity of a river. Field investigation problem was to determine whether the river Tsangpo flowing in China became the Bramhaputra upon entering India. Kinthup's plan was simple—he would mark 500 pieces of wood and float them on the Tsangpo. If it reached the Siang in Arunachal Pradesh, which became the Bramhaputra in Assam, it would confirm that the Tsangpo did indeed become the Bramhaputra.

Wonderful photographs of our diverse flora and fauna are seen throughout the book. The photograph of orphaned rhino calves, rescued and getting loving care at the IFAW-WTI Centre, left me thinking that no matter how large the babies (and rhino calves can be BIG) they are still babies and need nurturing! A sketch in four boxes illustrates fur patterns of the four big cats in Namdapha National Park–the tiger, the leopard, the clouded leopard and the snow leopard!

Sketches of hill top temples (Palitana in Shatrunjaya hills), monastaries, forts, observatory (the Indian astronomical observatory in Hanle) and homes constructed on the mountain slopes and terraces display our varied built heritage using the advantage provided by elevation.

As humans have ventured further and higher for both recreation and resources, habitats are being destroyed and ecosystems are getting degraded. Rare plants and animals are facing the threat of extinction. Mala Kumar raises these concerns time and again through the pages. She tries to link the cause and effect. Describing the increased demand for 'pink sandstone' from Kaimur range, she raises the question: 'Could the use of dynamite to mine more and more pink sandstone be the reason for cracks in Jargo Dam, near the city of Mirzapur?' She weaves in the need for conservation and respecting the environment and urges her young readers to do their bit to save them from getting destroyed.

Up the Mountains of India is exactly what the cover promises—a fun, fact-filled trek across the country's major ranges! This book is a brilliant contribution in the non-fiction genre for children. When the kids put the book down, their grown ups can pick it up for an exhilarating read!

Tultul Biswas

THAT YEAR AT MANIKOIL
By Aditi Krishnakumar
Duckbill, an imprint of Penguin Random House India, 2022,
pp. 192, ₹ 250.00

That Year at Manikoil is part of a series named 'Songs of Freedom' launched by Duckbill Books in the year of India's 75th year of Independence. It seeks to explore the lives of children across India during the struggle for Independence. What a welcome break! As a child, all one could lay hands on in the name of history were stories of national leaders and war heroes. The only children we read about were those that were part of the *vanar sena* of Allahabad, led by the child prodigy Indira Priyadarshini! And one often wondered: What were the children doing in those times? Did they go to school as usual? Were they scared with the volatile situation around? Did they climb trees to pluck mangoes and guavas as we often did?

That Year at Manikoil is set in Madras of 1944. It opens with the stress and trauma our protagonist—Raji—goes through under the shadow of her two extraordinarily brilliant sisters who excelled in studies, particularly Mathematics. It rings a familiar bell in my mind, having grown up under the shadow of a multi-talented elder sister! The solace of having an easy-going and protective brother too is a coincidental connection Raji strikes with me, and am instantly pulled into the book. As I read on, I can sniff the *sambhars* and *podis* and various other dishes that Mrs. Gunaseelan–our neighbour–would often treat us with, and am transported back to nostalgic memories of childhood in more ways than one!

Meanwhile, in the book, World War II rages in Europe and the Japanese army advances towards India through the Bay of Bengal. Gloom descends on the family when Raji's adored brother–Gopu Anna—decides to join the British Indian Army. He has to listen to his own calling. Raji and her sisters, separate from the father and other brother and are sent off with their mother to stay in Manikoil, her mother's family village. But with refugees fleeing from Malaya, Burma and other eastern countries back to India, Manikoil is no longer the idyllic place it was. Amidst all the stress and confusion around her, Raji finds solace in the form of Gopu Anna's letters and music.

The constant tussle between refugees, the local villagers and internally displaced persons like Raji narrated in the book reminds me that our collective Indian psyche and attitude towards neighbouring immigrants and war victims has barely changed in 80 years. Our treatment of the Bangladeshis and Rohingyas suggests it only seems to have gone from bad to worse. Raji, however, strikes an unusual friendship with Ilavarasi, a girl from Malaya. And while there is hope of Independence in the air, Raji is uncertain whether it will come to pass—and what it will truly mean for her and her family.

The story is narrated from the protagonist's standpoint and navigates through many not-so-easy subjects like the meaning of freedom, colonialism, immigration and refugee crisis and feminism. It raises questions like, what is it to ally? What does it mean to be brave, compassionate, and resourceful? Raji, at about 10 years of age, is not old enough to understand, but too old to be ignorant. Her voice comes across as authentic–at once thinking about what her role in the fight for freedom could be, and also tempted by everyday things–

like *jangiris* and *murukkus*, her *paattu vadyar* and her doubts about Ilavarasi's tall claims!

That Year at Manikoil is a slow, gentle read. One year in a ten-year-old's life is a long time, no matter what the pace of the outside world is. The only worry is whether the young adults of today will give as much time to the book as it demands.

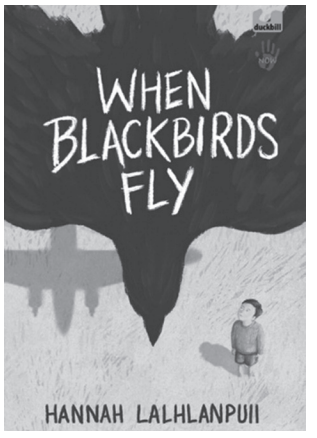
In the note at the end, the author writes, 'The town of Manikoil is, …, imaginary.' However, it became real to me through the prose–every detail of the town, the paddy fields, the school, the large sprawling house Thatha had built, the tree atop which Raji and Valli sat to eavesdrop on the freedom fighters' meeting, the bullock cart which they rode to attend a speech by Gandhi – all came alive in vivid detail.

Aditi Krishnakumar's thoughtful etching of characters is remarkable—not just the protagonist, but the sisters and brothers, mother, father, grand-parents, even uncles and aunts, and some neighbouring classmates for that matter—all come alive clearly in the reader's mind. She has successfully created an atmosphere that will make you root for the main character.

As the book ended, it brought a smile on my face and a tear in my eye! This mix of emotions is a warm experience.

Malati Mukherji

WHEN BLACKBIRDS FLY
By Hannah Lalhlanpuii
Duckbill, Not Our War Series, 2022, pp. 128, ₹ 199.00



'I cannot understand what they are fighting for–the MNF rebels. I am perfectly fine with the way things are; I cannot imagine what more freedom I need. Sometimes, I feel that people ask for too much.'

When Blackbirds Fly starts off as a simple story seen through a child's eyes. A nameless little boy who already has everything he wants in life and is content to chase spent shells with his best friend, walks back from school with the best girl in the world and listens to his grandfather's stories as he sits smoking his pipe by the window at night.

Hannah Lalhlanpuii's book is a part of the Not Our War series; books that deal with children growing up in a war zone. Growing up hapless victims of an adults' war they did not create and have no need for but from which they have no escape. The child keeps asking why things cannot remain the way they are.

The story is based in Mizoram of 1966 when the Indian Government in a bid to crush the Mizo National Front's rebellion, sent its warplanes to bomb Aizawl, killing and maiming innocent men, women, and children in the process. The citizens are not interested in the MNF's movement for freedom, nor in the Indian Government's retaliations. Like all civilians in war torn zones, they too want only to live in peace.

'As I am doing the dishes, I am happy to see Grandfather sitting in his usual seat by the window, smoking his pipe. He has barely spoken since our return, but I can tell from the look on his face that he is content to be back home after everything that had happened. This is why it is called home, because no matter how badly we had been shattered, there is always something, a sound or a sight to make you feel safe. This is what home feels like. I smile.'

When the planes come, they look like blackbirds and the citizens run out, waving to them in excitement. A little girl calls out, 'Bring back toys for us!' The bombing stuns them and sends them scurrying for cover, and then running away from their homes in the hope of escaping the pain.

Hannah Lalhlanpuii writes using simple sentences to describe a child's thoughts. But through them shine the burden of wisdom that only pain can deliver. 'This the first time I realize that silence has a weight and I can barely carry it.'

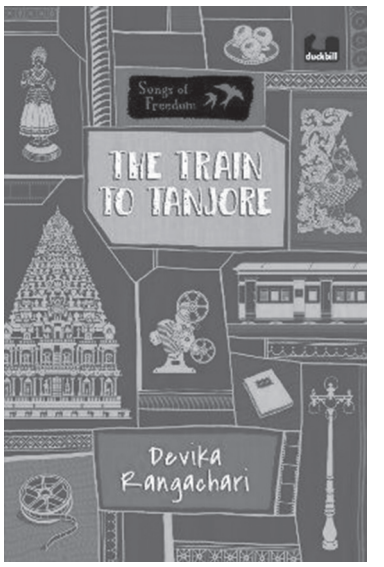
The slim book holds you spellbound as you read on, living the heartbreak with the nameless boy and his father and grandfather. Fearing the inevitable.

The cover is a brilliant pun in sketching, with the little boy gazing up at the friendly blackbird silhouetted in front while the ominous war plane roars at the back.

As Eglantyne Jebb said, 'Every war is a war against children.' But who is listening?

Nita Berry

THE TRAIN TO TANJORE
By Devika Rangachari
Duckbill, an imprint of Penguin Random House India, 2022, pp. 108, ₹ 250.00



History lessons in school can be pretty boring for 10-year-olds, with their rigmarole of dates, names of battles and rulers to contend with. They can be quite confusing and meaningless as well, for history happened a long time ago! Even something like India's freedom movement can become a part of the very hazy past. The same events seen in the form of a story become so much more memorable and interesting for young readers.

In *The Train to Tanjore* by Devika Rangachari, the Quit India movement spearheaded by Mahatma Gandhi in 1942 comes alive through the eyes of 10-year-old Thambi who lives in Tanjore (Thanjavur today) with his parents and little sister. Life is uneventful, with its highpoints revolving around his hanging about the New Madras Hotel with its wonderful aromas, or the public library. Tempestuous visits every other week by his pesky uncle from Mannargudi shake up the small household and break the monotony of life.

Thambi's story is set against a background of world events in addition to the freedom struggle in India–the World War in Europe, Japanese and American bombings… which he reads about avidly on the newspaper stands of the library once he turns ten. 'And that was how Thambi slowly slid into the world of grown-ups.'

However, history lessons in school never mention Gandhiji's

Quit India movement which is in the forefront of all the action and is fast gaining ground within the country. This is accompanied by lathi charges, shootings, arrests and brutal repression by the British authorities. In fact, none of the momentous events taking place in India are mentioned by the BBC either. Instead, the Quit India Press has surreptitiously started printing and distributing leaflets and posters in large numbers in the small towns, to acquaint the public with what is actually happening in the country. Thambi comes across one such leaflet with a timeline of how the British had destroyed India bit by bit ever since they took it over nearly a hundred years ago, 'stripping this colony of its riches and sending them back to England to feather their nests...' His blood begins to boil.

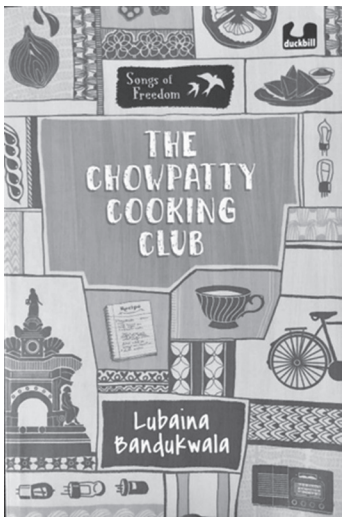
Now Thambi fancies himself a freedom fighter in addition to his other secret ambition of becoming a chief engineer, and he distributes leaflets furtively in school. As momentum gathers in the freedom struggle, Tanjore station, the lifeline of the small town, is vandalized and trains are stopped. The protests grow, and the library, offices and schools are closed, and arrests continue. What will happen now? The story becomes a powerful lesson in history even as Thambi has the courage to follow his dreams.

Devika Rangachari is an award-winning author with several books to her credit. A PhD in Indian history, she writes in her expressive and fluent style, backed by her deep knowledge of historical events. The story flows effortlessly through its action and dialogue. Much of this book is based on her father's memories of his boyhood in Tanjore. So, we have a kaleidoscopic view of life in the 40s in Tanjore, with charming details of Thambi's frugal home, of the confections sold at the school gates from a steel box, of birthdays at the Ranganathan temple or the Rajaram Electric theatre…The cover by Samar Bansal depicting quaint images of these old days like a projector adds to the flavour of the book.

The book is part of Duckbill's 'Songs of Freedom' series which focuses on the lives of children across India during the freedom struggle. It serves to bring a sense of immediacy and better understanding of this momentous period of Indian history which our young readers must know about.

Nita Berry

THE CHOWPATTY COOKING CLUB
By Lubaina Bandukwala. Cover illustration: Samar Bansal
Duckbill, an imprint of Penguin Random House India, 2022,
pp. 136, ₹ 250.00



An interesting title, and on the face of it this book is all about a cooking club in Chowpatty, Mumbai. However, the title turns out to be rather misleading, for here is a story of India's freedom movement as told by 10-year-old Sakina in the form of diary entries in 1942. Set in Mumbai within sprawling Parsi and Muslim households, the idea of fighting for freedom is fast gaining ground with Gandhiji's Quit India movement. Common people are growing sympathetic to the idea of a free India, although there are still many who are 'pro-British' and opposed to the idea, usually because of businesses at stake. Ten-year-olds like Sakina, Zenobia and Mehul are keen to help the movement in some way as protests and riots break out everywhere, and arrests grow. All this while their gourmand mothers are busy exchanging recipes and fancy dishes across Chowpatty!

Meanwhile, mysterious undercurrents in the narrative—a spy, a fire, a strange box in the garage make things intriguing. As friends and relatives disappear, the intensity of the protests grows. The underground People's Radio makes sure 'the voices of the people are heard, their sacrifices noted, and their stories told.' This is what the British authorities are so desperate to suppress.

Bit by bit, jigsaw pieces fall into place and a clear picture emerges of the by-lanes of Mumbai—which are veritable hotbeds of revolutionary activity, with the children and even their moms playing an important part.

The days leading up to India's Independence were momentous days indeed, of struggle and sacrifice, valour and defiance as mass arrests took place in towns and cities across India. Children today can be a part of that historic time through Duckbill's 'Songs of Freedom' series of which this book is a part. All the books in this series explore the lives of children across India during that stirring period of our history, as seen through their eyes.

Author Lubaina Bandukwala writes with an easy informality and humour. Sakina's 'formal' letters to the King of England are entertaining and endearing, and the story moves forward through action-filled fun. The author founded the Peek-a-Book Literature Festival for children, now in its fourth year. She was inspired by stories of Independence as told to her by her parents, and by the work of Gandhian Usha Mehta who ran the Congress Radio secretly with a team during the Quit India movement for four months in defiance of the British—till the time they were arrested.

The publishers are to be credited with bringing out this series, and presenting the freedom movement through the eyes of ordinary children, especially at a time when India@75 is being celebrated everywhere. Newspaper clippings and faded photographs from old family scrapbooks have been added to the end of the book, giving it a charming air of historical authenticity! The cover illustration and design by Samar Bansal add to the effect.

GJV Prasad

NAME PLACE ANIMAL THING
By Daribha Lyndem
Zubaan Books, 2021, pp. 199, ₹ 495.00

I must begin by saying that I loved this book. *Name Place Animal Thing* is about growing up as a Khasi girl in the ever politically-charged Shillong. It is a book of connected stories rather than a novel or novella (as the inner cover describes it), the stories connected by the first-person narrator referred to as D. The stories are told by an adult narrator who is recollecting her past, her childhood and young adulthood.

The very first story 'Bahadur' sets the tone for the rest of the book. Each of the stories is about a person and an episode or two in the life of the narrator. Bahadur is a general handyman who lives in the same locality as the narrator's family and does odd jobs for everyone on this estate. As his name shows, he is a Nepali in a place that is

soon to assert its native identity in sporadic but violent ways. Bahadur is employed by Mrs Guha who owns the part of the hill where various families live on rent. She too lives there in an Assam type house as the narrator notes. The narrator is only seven years old then, the same as Ajay, the youngest of Bahadur's children. D is friends with Bahadur's family and loves to eat with them in their shanty. We have the picture of a place where people of different ethnicities live together in peace, all of them exploiting Bahadur. However, the narrator learns that there are Khasis and there are the Dkhars and 'other' non-Khasis. Things change in this community when Ajay is attacked and no one other than a stranger and D's father help him to get to hospital. Bahadur loses his sense of belonging and takes his family back to Nepal. This beautifully written story ends with the narrator returning to the hills years later and seeing that it has turned into a graveyard, everything having changed utterly.

'Mr Baruah' has a happier ending but you can see that the growing narrator has already slotted him as a Dkhar and will not use the term 'Bah' for him but would call him 'uncle' instead. This is a lovely little story of two children, D and her younger cousin Craig, and their escapades. The last one is, as usual, the handiwork of D who has her suspicions about the harmless shopkeeper, Baruah. Luckily, the narrator learns in time that her suspicions about Baruah are ill-founded, that he is only a good man making the best of his circumstances.

In 'Avva', the now ten-year-old narrator sees the town changing in front of her eyes–she also eavesdrops on conversations between adults when they talk of the secessionist forces and their demand for money from the Dkhars and how the militant outfits are arbitrary and lawless. The popular Chinese origin owner of the restaurant, Avva, is forced to leave with his family when he is targeted for protection money. The narrator's grandmother has told her about the roundup of Chinese origin people during the India-China war of 1962 and how saddened others were. The same sense of sorrow overcomes all of them when Tommy Lu and his family leave Shillong. The much older narrator notes that while the worst of it is over, sporadic acts of violence still break out, and that there are localities that are still hostile to outsiders, especially labourers.

As the narrator grows up, living in their own house in a suburb, the calm and peaceful façade of Shillong shows up many more cracks. She sees her father himself showing signs of irritation with the Dkhars. Her favourite yellow bear which gives the title to the fourth story fades away and is full of repairs and holes and stays behind in her room when she goes off to college. There is a keen sense of time passing as it should in a book about growing up.

'Mrs Trivedi' is the first of two stories about school life. This is a story about unexpected and special bonds that develop between students and teachers. Mrs Trivedi is a moody Hindi teacher who leaves a void when she goes back to Kanpur to join her husband. 'Mr Sarkar' isn't directly about school though, it is a story about tuitions, about Maths tuition that the narrator attends. The tutor is her school Maths teacher's father. A story about a phase in the life of most school students, this one too has an unexpected twist–Mr Sarkar is not just a devout Christian, he wants to save the Dkhars by convincing them of the perils of a non-Christian life. A nice man and a good tutor, he makes us realize the hidden depths of people we come across every day. Full of interesting tidbits about growing up, the narrator not only describes the scenery and the scenes of Shillong life, she also brings in the everyday politics and tensions of this life.

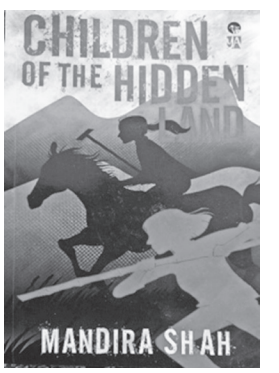
Stories like 'The Lawmali Graveyard' and 'Bishar Mary', give us a greater understanding of social divisions, the reach of patriarchy even in a matrilineal society, about community practices but more importantly, sketch characters with more understanding and depth showing us the ways in which the narrator changes with age and experience. 'The Revival' is a story about belief and the various ways in which people engage with and understand religion. Religion can be exclusionary, it can encourage bad faith, but it can also be a source of calm and peace.

The last story is about the narrator's best friend, Yuva, a Nepali. The story charts the ups and downs of a long friendship, one that is fraught in terms of ethnicity and the jealousy it arouses in others, apart from the exigencies of growing up. It is a sad story as all such stories have to be, part of the sadness coming from the very subject matter of the story and of the book–growing up, leaving behind your childhood and its sense of expectations and adventure and fellow-feeling among schoolmates. Life teaches you hard lessons, none harder that an awareness of mortality. This long story shows us what the book could have been if the author had so chosen.

Could this have been a novel? Yes, obviously. The stories work by themselves but it is the narrator and the recurring characters that give substance to the book. The narrator feels the need to cross refer to other stories in the book in the later stories and this underlines the fact that it could all have been one narrative. The stories are well-written, each one compelling, and they leave us wanting to know more. However, I feel that the writer was not sure of the audience for these stories–children or young adults or adults–and ended up addressing all three audiences. Does her choice of an older narrator necessitate this or was it the other way around? In any case, this is a book worth reading and worth gifting to teenagers and adults.

Ira Saxena

CHILDREN OF THE HIDDEN LAND
By Mandira Shah
Talking Cub, Speaking Tiger Books, 2021, pp. 224, ₹ 499.00



The story takes off on the school terrace with a young student manipulating a surveillance drone that captures a deadly secret of missing children and a shadowy figure known only as the Dragon. Two teenagers, April, a resident of Imphal and Shalini from the mainland living there with her father, an army man, jump into the plot to unravel the secrets running below the surface of this land, confronted at the onset, with the disappearance of a bright young boy handling the drone.

Action launches in full swing where there are no leads, only the sharp deduction and combat skills of the two girls. A dangerous world of drugs, cross-border smuggling of gold and child trafficking for expansion of the insurgent army are laid bare in their investigations. So does the scenery of the North East, far away to the fresh water

Loktak Lake. There are vivid descriptions of chase in the lanes, the dirt-tracks of the city, bamboo dwellings, and polo practice in the grounds surrounded by tree clusters and grasslands. Action remains the key throughout, as one after another, complexities of characters and rousing mysterious events complicate the drama. All along twists and turns of challenging situations enable better understanding between the girls overcoming cultural diversity and account of existing ideas of nationhood.

In the current social context, undercurrents of the search also prickle the conflicts of gender issues connoted in the text: '…it doesn't give our parents some superhuman capabilities to nurture us…we are not "our parents" and neither are we what they want us to be'; 'A struggle to break free from the chains that shackled them, the chains they had inherited over generations.'

A realistic portrayal of the societal structure, political pressures and rampant accusations of abuse by insurgents as well as Assam Rifles and government exist side by side with the progression of the story, never allowing the storyline to be superseded though. It suits the evolution of a thinking mind.

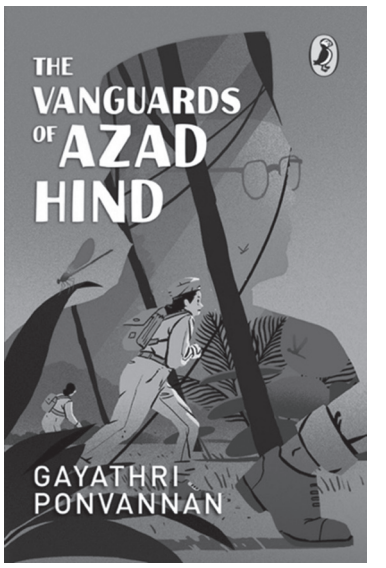
> …Power changes everything and what begins as a revolution of change, tends to change the organisation that has the power. So it is with Meira Paibis who now seem to be going all out for mob justice.
>
> Why give the officials an opportunity to make a target out of you? Why give them a chance to say that so and so was a violent activist?
>
> When the state doesn't do its job, doesn't it fall upon us, the civilians, to ensure that we get our civil rights? … But at present it is just filled with recruits who are not always sure what they are doing. Only motivated by personal vengeance. Or worse, brainwashed.…

Inspired by the true account of an abducted teenager who escaped the bondage of insurgents who were converting children into soldiers for their evil designs, the author, Mandira Shah, researched thoroughly into the rampant terrorism in the North East. Her descriptions of the scenery transport the reader into the charming world of natural beauty smeared by the prevailing terrorism. At no point does the novel lose touch with reality. The characters move through racy sequences naturally and stir the story from one electrifying episode into greater depths of an enigma. Not a moment to rest, no chance to stop, and the interest triggers at every nook and corner. Young readers would find the spine-tingling account gripping.

Shubhangi Pandit

THE VANGUARDS OF AZAD HIND
By Gayathri Ponvannan
Penguin Random House, 2022, pp. 256, ₹250.00

A story imagined in the backdrop of World War II and India's Freedom Struggle. The protagonist of the story is a 16-year-old girl, Kayal. The story unravels as she maintains a journal to record her journey from her orthodox home in Madras to the war camp of Netaji's Azad Hind Fauj in Burma and beyond. It is all about how the life of this school-going teen, with a patriotic fervour, takes a sudden turn when she leaves the traditional home of her parents who are all set to marry her off to 18-year-old Shiva. She decides to follow her aunt who she discovers is already a captain in the secret Army of Subhash Chandra Bose. Her prospective groom, Shiva follows her to ensure her safety but ends up signing up for the war camp too. The read does not come across as overly heavy or intense despite dealing with a subject of war but then one sees the risk of it being watered down so much that it could be both misunderstood and misleading.



The plot is set in the times of 1943. So, we are looking at the generation of parents of the Boomers. However, the conversation as well as the imagery in the story seems more like that of Gen Z. Perhaps, this has been meant to be that way so that the Gen Z readers relate to the characters easily, but then that results in leaving one tied up to these times and never getting carried back to times bygone thus NOT meeting an important need of a story woven around the historical past, which is to give a clear sense of time and context.

Then there are other things that do not draw the right picture or not draw it enough like the episode where Kayal's father, who isn't sketched as a patriotic person, agrees to let his only child sign up for a 'war camp' as though she was enrolling for a school camp! His reaction of shock/sorrow/horror, expected of a man in the 1940s in an orthodox set up, is completely missing. The fantasy woven around the war camp is perhaps understandable because it is expressed through the naïve senses of a young teen. However, one wonders whether one should assume the same naivety for the adult aunt, or whether one should question her integrity when she assures the parent of the teen about her safety(?!) and then disappears to appear again only at the time of war. In fact, Azad Hind Fauj did not stand for 'safety' in any way. It was about 'giving your blood for the freedom of your country'! After all, what safety can one promise young, inexperienced teens fighting or supporting the front with nothing but a few weeks of training at a war camp!

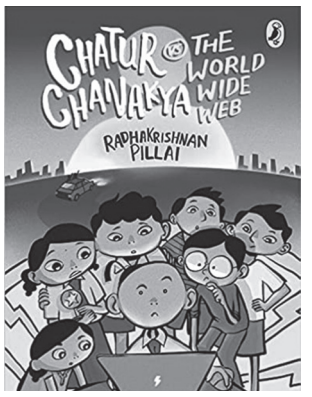
The story is delivered in an interesting manner with turns and twists which many a times seem far from reality, separated from the time and place of occurrence but the continuous chain of events promises a boredom-free read and manages to bring to the young reader a glimpse of the difficult social conditions prevailing in India under British rule. The intention, to remind the younger generations of the spirit and sacrifices of the people from across all sections of the society, especially women, who fought unitedly for the country's Independence under the unmatched leadership of a hero like Subhash Chandra Bose, is appreciated. However, a more wholesome sketch of Netaji would have done adequate justice to his impactful image etched in the hearts and minds of Indians. Also, the women captains and chiefs in the story are not sketched to portray outstanding virtues that exhibited their inner mettle and zeal.

The book has no illustrations. Some outline maps or simple hand drawn route-maps could have added value to the useful bit of relevant geographical and historical data found here and there. The print size is comfortable with a few typos. The quality of pages is ordinary. The narration sticks to spoken Indian English rendered in a journal style. In some places, in an attempt, to make the dialogues sound like commonly heard incorrect English conversation, grammar seems to have been deliberately ignored. The vocabulary is decent.

Overall, the story through its narration seems to present the case of Azad Hind Fauj to juvenile readers. It attempts to depict the circumstances in which fighting a war for freedom found its roots and how the people found a leader in the heroic Netaji. This in my view, is content with a sensitive subject of war and is an appropriate subject for teens to deliberate upon, provided it is dealt with adeptly because the readers are impressionable young minds!

Ranjana Kaul

CHATUR CHANAKYA VS. THE WORLD WIDE WEB
By Radhakrishnan Pillai
Puffin Books, 2022, pp. 86, ₹ 250.00



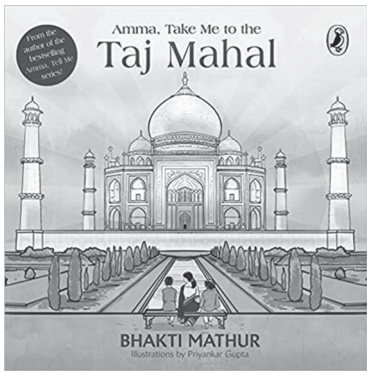
Chatur Chanakya vs the World Wide Web is the sequel to Radhakrishnan Pillai's first delightful book, *Chatur Chanakya and the Himalayan Problem*, which introduced readers to the *Super Six* gang of Ganesh colony including Chanakya, the pale, slender and rather unlikely hero. As the stories unfold, however, we gradually realize that this modern Chanakya is aptly named after the shrewd mentor and advisor of the Mauryan emperor Chandragupta who also authored the classic political treatise, the *Arthashastra*. The modern day Chanakya's wit and smartness belie his rather unprepossessing outward appearance with a lanky physique and a thin *choti* sprouting from his head and before we know it, we are caught up in the adventures of Arjun, Lakshmi, Chanakya and their other friends.

Chanakya is like a youthful Sherlock Holmes blessed with acute powers of observation, but he is also helped in finding solutions to very modern problems by his familiarity with ancient strategic concepts such as '*neti neti', aanushakti, chakravyuha*, etc. Chanakya is familiar with ancient scriptures and treatises, having been home-schooled by his erudite parents, but he is more than willing to become a part of the tech savvy generation in his school and learn about the internet and social media. The story engages with a very topical issue, cyberbullying, but in a manner which makes it part of an adventure or a mystery to be solved. As the children try to discover the culprit who has been harassing one of the friends, Lakshmi, they also gradually come to realize the necessity for some degree of parental control over access to social media. There are no real villains in this story, but it moves along at a fast pace as the gang and Chanakya rush to solve the mystery before Lakshmi is bullied into withdrawing from the math quiz.

Pillai's books are an effortless and entertaining way of introducing the young reader to a preeminent figure from Indian history who is a byword for shrewd strategizing. As the readers engage with the dilemmas, problems and adventures confronting the young protagonists, the fictional Chanakya introduces them to ideas and concepts drawn from the past and shows their relevance and applicability even in the present. Ultimately, however, it is the unexpected twists and turns in the plot which draw the reader to this youthful whodunit and make it so engaging!

Neera Jain

AMMA, TAKE ME TO THE TAJ MAHAL
By Bhakti Mathur
Puffin Books, 2022, pp. 88, ₹ 399.00



Amma, Take Me to the Taj Mahal is the latest addition to the 'Amma Take Me' series written by Bhakti Mathur. In the earlier books Amma took her two sons to the Golden Temple, Tirupathi, Dargah of Salim Chishti and Shirdi. As the author, Bhakti Mathur, says in her introductory note, 'The series is an attempt to introduce children to the places of historical interest and different faiths in India. Styled as the travelogues of a mother and her two young children, these books link history, archaeology, tradition and mythology to bring alive the major monuments of India in an engaging and informative way.'

Puffin is doing well to fill an obvious gap in children's literature in India. Given the richness of India's history, one in which influences from Europe, West Asia and Central Asia permeate all art, it is a pity that children do not get books that are interesting as well as informative about Indian monuments. Any book that simply rattles off facts about places of historical interest is unlikely to capture a young reader's interest. It is the human-interest story that must be told first so that children get interested in the monument or shrine or temple that is being talked about. Bhakti Mathur does just this.

When I started reading the book, I was curious to know from what point the author would pick up the Taj's tale. I soon found out that she went all the way back to the very beginning—from the time of the coronation of twelve-year-old Babur in a kingdom called Ferghana in Central Asia. Babur went on to establish the Mughal dynasty in India and the rest, as they say, is history. Bhakti takes her time to leisurely tell the tale of the Battle of Panipat in which Babur defeated Ibrahim Lodhi and became the emperor of his kingdom. Babur was a warrior but he was also passionate about designing gardens as was his famous ancestor, Timur. Babur brought the concept of *char bagh* to India and it is this concept that one sees in the garden of Taj Mahal.

The story itself is riveting enough, given the Mughal's proclivity for killing kin without compunction and giving short shrift to ethical considerations. Bhakti relates all the gory drama that took place in the Mughal dynasty before the building of the Taj. And yet the monument itself is an affirmation of love, that of the emperor Shah Jahan for his wife, Mumtaz Mahal. Bhakti describes the rare relationship between the two, 'Shah Jahan sought Mumtaz's advice on key matters. Mumtaz had no political ambitions but was politically astute and was known to influence Shah Jahan, particularly on issues that women were facing. She had a soft, discreet approach and relied on her Persian friend and attendant, Satti al-Nisa Khannan, to bring to her attention cases of underprivileged girls and women in need.' The author goes on to say, 'Mumtaz was influential but did not control Shah Jahan. She was in every sense, his equal.'

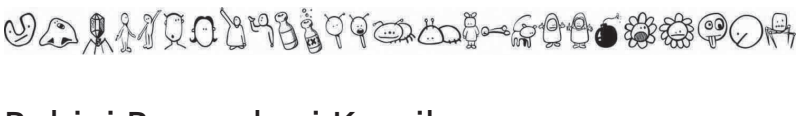
Just three years into his reign, Shah Jahan lost Mumtaz Mahal. As always she had accompanied him on his military campaign and died while giving birth to their fourteenth child. She was 38. A heartbroken emperor began to plan a mausoleum of unparalleled beauty for his dead wife. Gradually the plan became more and more grand and Bhakti writes, 'Shah Jahan's passion for architecture and

his perception of monuments as a symbol of power motivated the designs for the Taj Mahal as much as the emperor's love for Mumtaz.'

Finally, a mausoleum of exquisite beauty came into being and the author does complete justice to her subject by describing in detail how it was designed, built and later restored. From describing the fine inlay work that adorns the walls and ceiling of the Taj to the mathematical calculations that went into placing the minarets, Bharti Mathur leaves little of consequence untold. So much so that she explains in detail why despite being so close to the Yamuna river the mausoleum is in no danger of getting flooded.

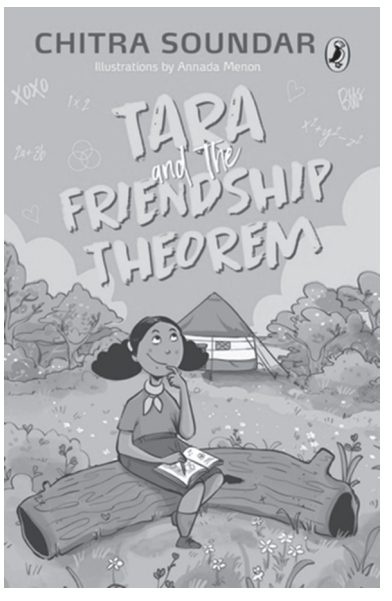
The making of the Taj is the stuff of popular folklore. It is said that after getting the Taj built the emperor ordered that the hands of the workmen be cut off so that they would never make a monument of such beauty again. But Bhakti does not relate this questionable story. Instead, she gives details, names and contributions of the many people who played important roles in the building of the Taj. It is thus refreshing to see the Taj as an architectural feat instead of a mausoleum wrapped in stories of intrigue and cruelty.

There is no doubt that the book is well-researched and comprehensive. Designing a book on the Taj must have been challenging. Congratulations to the editor for selecting an 8 by 8-inch size, a size that lends itself beautifully to displaying the four-colour illustrations. All who read the book will surely enjoy both. Priyankar Gupta, the artist, has illustrated the book beautifully and profusely. The full spreads are gorgeous. So glad to see that the style of illustration is traditional. Also, happy to see that there is no interruption in the text with boxed information popping up here and there.



Rohini Rangachari Karnik

TARA AND THE FRIENDSHIP THEOREM
By Chitra Soundar. Illustrations: Annada Menon
Puffin Books, 2022, pp. 256, ₹250.00



'Friendship isn't dictated by logic or form—it just is.' This powerful quote encapsulates the conundrum in Chitra Soundar's delightful and adventurous tale that is inspired by her own childhood in Chennai and a young girl's anxiety of moving countries and searching for a new friend. The ancient mancala game[1] *Pallanguzhi* that the author played with her friends as she grew up is at the centre of her tale as her main character Tara also plays it with her best friend Farida before moving to England with her family.

On the flight to London, Tara finds a maths book called *Solving the Problem of Life* in her bag along with a little note from her professor that reads, 'There isn't a problem in the world that maths can't solve.' The first chapter called 'The Friendship Theorem', also the title of this book, is what Tara uses to help her find a new friend in Camp Wilderness, a camp that she and her brother Kapil are enrolled in upon arriving in London. More comfortable indoors with coding and maths, needless to say that Tara is less-than-thrilled with this outdoor camp with its trees and animals. Determined to find a new friend, Tara sets out to apply the Friendship Theorem in her new surroundings.

As it may be known, the Friendship Theorem is stated to have originally been proved by mathematicians Paul Erdős, Alfred Rényi, and Vera Sós in a paper published in 1966. It states, 'Suppose in a group of at least three people we have the situation that any pair of persons have precisely one common friend. Then there is always a person who is everybody's friend.' In other words, six degrees of separation. The friendship theorem is translated into a theorem in graph theory: 'Suppose that G is a finite graph in which any two vertices have precisely one common neighbor. Then there is a vertex which is adjacent to all other vertices.'

Tara makes a geometric representation of the Friendship Theorem in the Conference Room of the wilderness camp in the presence of Millie, another young camp participant who loves juggling. Millie wisely proclaims, 'if you ask me, friendship and theorem should not be in the same sentence.' There lies the book's real conundrum–does friendship work like maths–with logic?

Tara plays *Pallanguzhi* with Millie and learns to her surprise that Millie is her yurt[2] mate. Millie shows Tara how to use the torch and helps in rescuing Bailey, Toby's dog when he goes missing. Other incidents bring Tara and Millie together, including Millie offering Tara a chance to do the clown act with her. Little by little, Tara realizes that her friendship theorem is not working as no one single person emerges as her best friend, and that Millie and Chloe and Violet are all her friends who invite her to perform with them. Tara is able to perform in the Clown Act with Millie and in the dance show with Chloe and Violet for all the parents.

As the camp draws to a close and Tara leaves with her family, she realizes the meaning of her best friend Farida's words, 'Strangers are friends we haven't come to know yet.' She concludes that her friendship theorem has worked…like magic.

1. Mancala games are a family of two player turn-based strategy board games that are played with small stones, beans or seeds and rows of holes or pits in the earth.

2. A traditional yurt (from the Turkic languages) or ger (Mongolian) is a portable, round tent covered with skins or felt and used as a dwelling by several distinct nomadic groups in the steppes of Central Asia. In Tara and the Friendship Theorem "yurt" is used to designate a camp tent.

Vishesh Unni Raghunathan

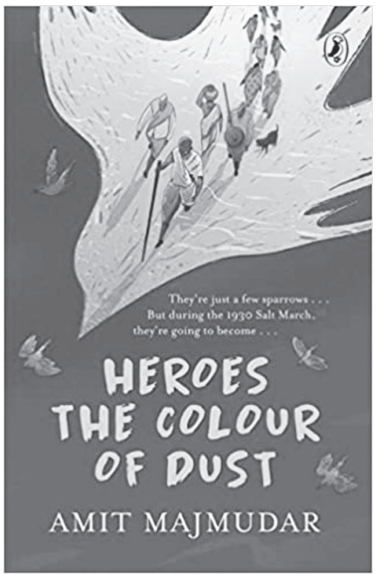
HEROES THE COLOUR OF DUST
By Amit Majmudar. Illustrations: Aaradhana Rawat
Puffin, 2022, pp. 123, ₹ 299.00

Heroes the Colour of Dust by Amit Majmudar is a book on the Dandi Salt March told from the perspective of sparrows. The story follows Blatherquill, Thunderpuff, and other sparrows, as they stop a couple of Britishers (and a mutt) from derailing the march.

The author seems to have conceived of the birds as allegorical. While the idea seems nice enough, the writing uses a thin coat of apparent fiction to pass off deliberate inaccuracies and agendas as part of history. As we are warned by the author in his introduction,

'Everything in this book is absolutely true. That includes

The things that happened,
The things that didn't really happen
The things that happened while I was off somewhere else, and
The things that would have happened if history had been more interested in telling an exacting tale.'



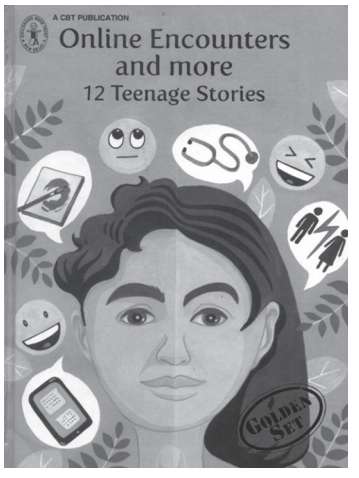
The comical exaggerations of evil but dumb Britishers (who would have made fine pantomime villains), birds with caste (a Brahmin(y) kite which proudly says that he's of a high-altitude caste, highborn and high-flown) etc., build a narrative that seems all too real, and not really fiction. Add to this the evident jingoism throughout, which makes for uncomfortable reading.

In his conclusion the author explains his reductive opinion on how British money apparently helped enslave the whole of India. He goes on to explain how Gandhi used the media opportunities to 'shame the British'.

Heroes the Colour of Dust by Amit Majmudar, an American citizen, is a book which under the guise of fiction tries to build a narrative of how apparently violent jingoism allowed Gandhi to accomplish his goals. While inspired fiction is a good way to help young learners engage with history, the inaccuracies and ideas can misinform and misdirect them.

Tarika Chari

ONLINE ENCOUNTERS AND MORE: 12 TEENAGE STORIES
Children's Book Trust, 2021, pp. 111, ₹ 150.00



An anthology of 12 teenage stories, this book covers topics like online dating, bullying, child marriage, and more. Each narrator shares a story that means something to them. Life lessons and experiences are compiled together and are easily immersible with illustrations by Ajanta Guhathakurta.

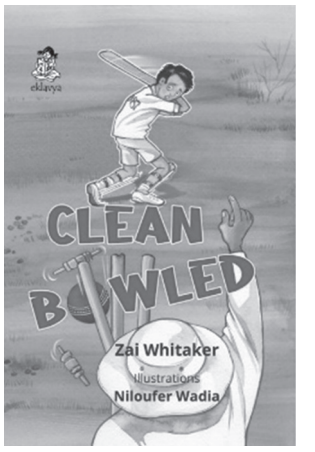
Each short story in the anthology was descriptive, quickly introducing the reader to what's currently happening. Some parts of the story are solely descriptive, and without dialogue it can become a bit difficult to read, but each story compels you to see the conclusion. More importantly, many meaningful issues are addressed. In the first story, the danger of meeting an online friend in real life is emphasized, but also the idea that it should not be forbidden. The second story explores the experience of being pressured into a career by family members. In the third, you have a young girl who wants to pursue education but is shackled by the constraints of child marriage and tradition. These stories help address these issues and provide a teenager's perspective on them, which is invaluable as they are people who are a part of these situations.

As a teenager myself, I found that I agreed with quite a bit of what the characters were thinking. Of course, all teenagers might not share the same opinions on these topics, but at least these thoughts and ideas are being shared. So while this anthology might not be an exciting thriller novel or a mystical fantasy tale, it talks about things that need to be talked about.

For young teenagers everywhere, this book is good to help sort out your thoughts and get them heard by others. For adults, this book is a helpful reference to keep another perspective in mind, and it is important to value and encourage a teenager's feelings and perspective. Even without those goals in mind, each story is enjoyable to read with happy or hopeful endings, so if that interests you, go ahead and read it!

Ankur Pandey

CLEAN BOWLED
By Zai Whitaker. Illustrations: Niloufer Wadia
Eklavya, 2021, pp. 66, ₹ 90.00



The story revolves around the town of Thapoli and its shenanigans around cricket. The search for an umpire, the match and the climax and the hero setting an example to follow are the focus area of the story.

Cricket, which is seen as a man's game with lots of complicated rules and regulations, is made easy for everybody to understand, using simple language and beautiful narration of the Thapoli town, and how Thapoli Ashes become the carnival of its kind for the town. The town was founded by Dhirubhai Patel who was an avid cricket-lover (naming his own house after the town where Sir Donald Bradman was born) and started the Thapoli Ashes—a match between team from manufacturing hub of his underpants industry known as Thapoli and one from the dhobi ghat suburbs known as Vakoli.

The Thapoli Ashes is an annual event eagerly awaited by the people of Thapoli. The practice for Thapoli Ashes had begun and it was a great pride that all four cousins from Shanti Niwas found a place in the Thapoli team. This was also a proud moment for their school as they were the only four to represent the Dhirubhai Patel English Medum School which had its own story that would interest potential readers.

The narrative focuses on bringing forth good things about the gentleman's game and helping children have those values even when they're in competitive spaces. This year the duty of umpiring was with the Thapoli team but they were yet to find the umpire. Women were also asked if they would take the job but no one was ready. This reveals how the game of cricket has its own gender issues, but when a child asks if women could be umpires, the response is a yes. The affirmative response helps set a counter-example for children. But the book fails to identify any woman player in town which would have reinforced this assertion.

The book focuses on how cricket values the spirit of the game, team spirit, and showcases how people are crazy about cricket

and follow it like a religion. It also talks about the honesty, which is slowly eroding in present times with games becoming more competitive. Portrayed as one of the core values that cricket holds onto very dearly, the storyline goes through lot of ups and downs—adding to the pace of the book that will cater well to young adult readers—whether you are a cricket fan or not, whether you have knowledge about the game or not!

The illustrations are great but few. Some are informative too, for e.g., the depiction of the forms of dismissals, etc.

The book is a must read for avid cricket lovers and will help enhance children's knowledge on the technical side of the game in a very fun and easy manner.

Brajesh Verma

ABBU KHAN KI BAKRI

By Dr. Zakir Hussain. Translated from the original Urdu by Anwar-e-Islam
Illustrations: Tavisha Singh
Eklavya, 2022, pp. 20, ₹ 55.00

Abbu Khan ki Bakri is a timeless tale written by the third President of India Dr. Zakir Hussain, who has written many stories for children. Dr. Zakir Hussain was born in 1897. The story, reflecting those times, is about the situation of slavery, the pain of bondage and the frustration and struggles for freedom. The story takes us to a Himalayan village of Almora where Abbu Khan resides. He rears goats and sheep with care. He tries to scare the animals about the wolf that lives on the mountains, but the free-minded goats don't stay with Abbu Khan however much he tries.

I had read this story in my school Hindi textbook *Bhasha Bharti*. At that time, I had perceived the story only as a story of goats and the wolf. The story seems relevant for children above 14-15 years. There are many layers in the story that keep unfolding as you read along. It starts with the loving relationship between Abbu Khan and his goats, but as the narrative progresses, it turns towards the desire for freedom and the never-ending hope to find it. The struggle within the goat, Chandni—the dilemma of whether to embrace freedom or to accept her life in caring bondage—has been narrated very beautifully.

The story opens up a feminist outlook for its readers. Abbu Khan loves Chandni a lot and wants to keep her under his control. The story reveals that even in extremely loving relationships, there can be violation of individual freedom. Very subtly, it points towards the social pressures that force women to remain jailed within the four walls of a 'home' and accept the chains without even uttering a word.

In one of the turns in the narrative, it almost seems imminent that Chandni would return to Abbu Khan from the mountains and spend the rest of her life in the barbed wired barn. And just then the independent, freedom-loving character of Chandni presents itself in full strength. She rejects the life trapped in boundaries.

The last line of the story, 'but the old she-bird is stubborn in her opinion that it was Chandni who won'—shows that the outcome of your efforts is not always important. Rather what is of import is the degree of your effort. And Chandni's night-long fight with the wolf shows her strong will power.

The illustrations of the book are very realistic. They take us for a visit to the mountains and hilly villages, and familiarize us with the context of the story. As I flip through the book soaking in the images I am reminded of a song sung by some children I know, *'Gode mein pahadon ke bachchon se ghar… sham hui utar pada jheel mein shahar…!'* These images help us walk through the story. When Chandni is sad, the reader also feels sad. When the wolf lurks and reveals its scary face, it sends a chill down our backs too! You can experience the frolicking and bounding about of Chandni through the images drawn.

The language of the story is simple, deeply tender and sensitive—it reaches your heart straightaway.

Indu Nair

SYANA

By Anirudha Umat. Illustrations: Tavisha Singh
Jugnoo, 2021, pp. 22, ₹ 50.00

This book appears to have been nurtured by the warmth of the desert winds and the colours of sand. The empathy and sensitivity in the relationship between humans and animals in the desert-land depicted in the story touches the reader deeply. Images of the travelling camel caravans visiting my city every summer came alive in my mind while reading the book.

Camel owners usually decorate and adorn their animals with love and care—which is vividly picturized in the illustrations in this book. The traditional attire of the dry and sandy parts of Rajasthan are also shown beautifully. This gives the readers, especially children, an opportunity to engage with the environment and culture of this region. The use of typical Rajasthani words in the text gives it a typical flavour and sweetness.

Syana, the camel, lives its name to the core of its meaning! It goes against the rest of the caravan. As we turn from page to page, the worries of Syana keep increasing. Khadaiti's (the camel groomer) love for its animal touches new heights of humanity. The tussle between the need to be with the group and care for the lonely animal breathes through the text.

Tavisha Singh has beautifully captured the colours and moods of the desert in the illustrations. The morning, noon and night peep out of the images vividly. You can actually see the caravan of camels climb up a dune in a full moon light.

Book News ***Book News***

Talabandi Mein Balbeeti by Ankur's community of writers and illustrated by Harmanpreet Singh is a collection of stories by children and young adults from the wage-earner communities, narrating their experiences of the lockdown.

Eklavya, 2022, p. 200, ₹ 150.00

Mihir Pathak

GAMLE MEIN JUNGLE
By Vinod Kumar Shukla. Illustrations: Chandramohan Kulkarni
Jugnoo, 2021, pp. 24, ₹ 60.00

Vinod Kumar Shukla's new creation—*Gamle Mein Jungle*—takes us on a sailing boat into the deep seas of imagination.

Are we any different from the rest of nature? Can we live in harmony with all other living beings? Be it a river, mountain, tree or elephant—what kind of relationship do we have with them? Are we trying to rule over them? Can we let all be as they are? These and more such questions are what the theme of this poem is. The poet has tried to present his thoughts in very simple language, but the moment we are able to reach its import, it gives us a jolt.

क्या होगा अगर जितना बाहर है उसमें सब घर ही घर बन जाएं?
तब बाहर बचेगा ही नही।
बाहर की खिड़की होगी नही
बाहर जाने दरवाजा नही होगा
घर के अंदर से होकर घर–घर जाएंगे।

The simplicity of his language, the choice of words, the sentence construction and the depth of his thoughts gives a new and unique experience to the reader.

अगर सब जगह घर बन जाएंगे तो पहाड़ का और नदियों का क्या होगा?
क्या नदी को हम बाल्टी में रखेंगे? फिर तो समंदर के लिए और नई बाल्टियां खरीदनी पड़ेगी।
और जंगल? क्या जंगल को हम गमले में रखेंगे?
दूसरे प्राणी, जीव–जंतु, कीट पतंगों को कहा रखेंगे?
उनको क्या खिलाएंगे और हम क्या खाएंगे?

The poem gives us a chance to enter into a different and very important dialogue with children:

What is it to build a house?
What are the things that we try to control?
Do we try to control those whom we love?
If the jungles were to speak, what would they say?

The questions emerging from this poem encompass domains like Social Science, Environment, Language—and they could be turned into a project or a reflective exercise on all of these in an integrated manner.

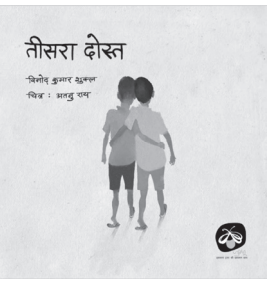
The co-narrator of this creative pursuit are Chandramohan Kulkarni's illustrations. The illustrations do not bend down to the level of children but rather jump to be with them. They add a dimension to the textual narrative and make them come alive.

Books like these traverse a road less travelled in the world of children's literature. They do not have repetitive words, neither bright colours nor funny cartoon characters. They instead carry deep questions that matter to the world. They open up opportunities for free imagination. And a different taste of language.

The production quality, paper used and printing have all added to the quality of the book. Greetings to Ektara and Jugnoo Prakashan for this initiative.

Shiv Narayan Gour

TEESRA DOST
By Vinod Kumar Shukla. Illustrations: Atanu Roy
Jugnoo, 2022, pp. 10, ₹ 50.00



Teesra Dost by Vinod Kumar Shukla is a delightful offering by Ektara Publications. Going by the number of words and pages, one might think of it as a short story. But as you get into the story and especially if you have read Vinod Kumar Shukla before and know his writing style, this perception changes. The insightful use of everyday language takes you into the depths of the realm of friendship; the story expands into a much bigger one than what meets the eye.

The title *Teesra Dost* makes you curious about the third friend when in the beginning you are introduced to two. However, the author's skill and style give the reader a chance to roam the wider world through his writing. Then perhaps the question where is the third character of the title of the story—will not remain a priority for you. At such a time, you will get lost in the imagery and metaphors created in your mind by this story. The book will primarily appeal to the young adults. But since it revolves around friendship, readers of all ages will be able to connect to it with their own experiences.

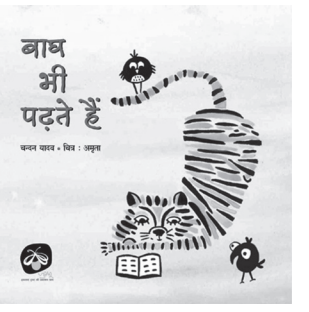
This story demands a pause after reading to be able to explore the meaning behind it fully. For example, at the beginning of the story, (I translate), 'We were both good friends. Growing up, spending childhood days in friendship…I am more of his friend than I ever thought. Maybe he feels the same way.' These few lines showcase how the story offers opportunities to the readers to create their own meaning. There is plenty of such space. According to Louis Rosenblatt's transactional theory on the process of poetry reading, the meaning of a poem is created by the reader. The message of the author can be completely different from the meaning taken away by the reader. This can also be seen in the context of other art forms. Vinod Kumar Shukla too brings this to life in his stories and poems.

Atanu Roy's work has given a new direction to illustrations in children's books. In this book, his illustrations build in many more stories in each line!

Lastly, I would say that if the title of the book was something other than *Teesra Dost*, then, perhaps the reader would have had a chance to decide the quest that was set at the very beginning. But the title of the story and the story beginning with the mention of two friends already decide where the book is going to take you.

Apoorva Raje

BAGH BHI PADHTE HAIN
By Chandan Yadav. Illustrations: Amrita
Jugnoo, 2022, pp. 32, ₹ 100.00



Bagh Bhi Padhte Hain written by Chandan Yadav and illustrated by Amrita is a short story collection. Most of the characters are animals which might remind you of folktales but on

reading you realize that these take on the content with a touch of humour and eventually arrive at practical, kind and humane resolutions. Some stories are, in fact, retelling with a fresh ending. One more perspective which makes these stories a fun read.

Along with the fun element, some serious themes like segregation, police interaction, migration etc., have been touched upon which leaves the reader with much to ponder. The subtleness and the natural way in which this has been done is quite commendable.

One of the stories, 'Kala Aur Main', I feel, needs special mention because it stands out. It's a story of friendship, migration, identity and so much more. The illustration for this story is also slightly different from the rest of the book.

The illustrations by Amrita are in mixed artforms. They have both the traditional and cartoon style which complement the style of storytelling in this book. The intentional use of a hint of colour with majority of black and white tones makes the colours pop. Although darker shades have been used much more than vibrant ones, perhaps on purpose.

Overall, it's an engaging read. A conversation starter on various themes explored in the book.

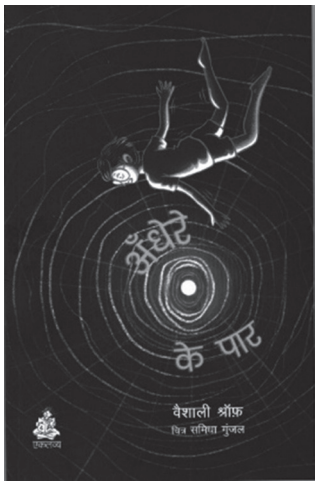
The production quality, paper used and printing is of good quality.

Kakoli Roy

ANDHERE KE PAAR

By Vaishali Shroff. Illustrations: Samidha Gunjal. Translated from the original English by Himalay Tehsin

Eklavya, 2021, pp. 68, ₹ 90.00



Andhere ke paar is a story of a young boy, SP, about 10-11 years old, from a middle-class (well-to-do) urban nuclear family, who is facing bullying by his schoolmates. Reading ahead, we realize that along with bullying, there's also a dynamic of 'unmet' parental expectations and consequent disappointments that have led the boy's struggle with his self-esteem, gradually leading to depression.

Many parents who come to us find it difficult to accept that depression and other mental health issues have nothing to do with biological age. Yes! A ten year old too can suffer from depression and in fact, many of them do. Triggers and factors could be various; including those that adults may have said or done, mostly unintentionally, but often without realizing the gravity of their repercussions on the child's mental and emotional state.

Some parents lament, 'We are doing everything for our child/ren. They have everything they want. What do they have to be depressed about?'. Others say, '...but our children are playing as usual, they are studying. What is there to worry about?' The question to ask here is, have we ever tried to know what is going on in their heads? Children could be struggling to accept themselves, tired fulfilling expectations, under pressure to perform and excel, feeling inferior, dealing with self-esteem, facing bullying or harassment... The list could go on.

In SP's case, his (perceived) *inability* to meet his parents' expectations was one of the triggers. Not assertive enough to say no, SP had almost given in to those expectations, sidelining his own interests that did not align with them. The bullying only worsened his inferiority complex further. This also points at the 'social image' issue. The pressure to maintain a 'good' image is so high that even a slight jerk to that triggers feelings of rejection.

SP's close friends, Lobo and Kuhu too experience name-calling by other schoolmates. As I get familiar with all of them, I notice how each has developed her/his own way of coping with difficult and humiliating situations that they experience. Lobo, who is teased for his physique, comes across as someone with awareness and acceptance of self–nothing could depress his spirit. Meaner the comment, funnier and wittier were his comebacks. Kuhu was ridiculed for being 'like a boy'. She had learnt to let these words slide, not let them cross the ear-barriers and enter inside.

Psychological discourse corroborates that if children are aware of their strengths, weaknesses and interests, it does boost their confidence. If they struggle to understand and accept themselves, they are more likely to struggle with self-esteem issues then and later in life.

What further amazes me is the careful, aware narration of going through a depression. It is indeed like a dark hole, an overbearing darkness that tries of cut one off from the world outside, to bottle-up from expressing, from enjoying what we once pursued dearly (drawing, in SP's case). How the dark clouds of fear and anxieties take over and how one is deceived to believe that death is the only way out; thus, suicide. What a commendable job done, of presenting such a complex psychological reality to our young adult readers, in a relatable way. An impressive attempt to make those feel heard, who are struggling in silence, alone!

The author has also entwined some simple therapeutic tricks and techniques to help cope.

Kuhu and her family members offer SP an eye-opener, that he is not the only one to suffer and struggle; they offer a ray of resilience, having coped with the death of a loved one and, thereafter, embracing life with hope and positivity again. As if reassuring him that there are other ways to get through difficult times. It may sound preachy, but a positive attitude does have a key role to play, in dealing with anxieties and depression; and to push one out of recurring cycle of harmful thoughts.

A second essential is sharing. In about 38 years of practice, what we have seen and realized is how absence of sharing and suicide attempts are closely connected. Opening up offers alternative perspectives, different coping mechanisms, also an assurance that one is not alone or unheard. Sometimes, it is all that is required. Be it SP's brief exchange with his mother about the empty drawing sheet or his visit to Kuhu's house or his exchange with Lobo and Kuhu at the end—all tell us how at times even the smallest conversation matters.

The author also talks about other techniques, such as, sports or outdoor games, pursuing hobbies, as they offer an escape from withholding thoughts and isolation. She touches upon the need of frustration tolerance too. We often have a hard time accepting and getting over rejection. While it is an inseparable part of life, appearing in various forms or situations, it is certainly not an end in itself! The competition-oriented system and a common reality of urban middle and upper-middle class households where children rarely face a 'no' to their demand(s), makes it a crucial life-skill to be nurtured from early years.

The book is actually a must read for all parents as well. We definitely need more such stories narrating children's mental and emotional struggles. Such books will be of great help, especially in the settings where counselling support is still not accessible. While

the context of the story is urban and so are my comments, much of it is prevalent across contexts. It has also left me pondering over the specifics of children's mental health scenario in rural and tribal areas.

Tanaya Soni

ZAMEEN HUMKO GHUMATI HAI
By Gulzar. Illustrations: Allen Shaw
Jugnoo, 2022, pp. 32, ₹ 130.00

The book *Zameen Humko Ghumati Hai* is an interestingly inquisitive poem of how the author questions the wonders of nature, particularly the earth. Throughout the book and the poem, the author states his astonishment at the many attributes of nature.

The poem starts by describing the author's amusement on learning that the ground would do as he asks of it, that if he sows seeds for grapes, he'll get a full-grown bunch of them later on, if he plants it a pink rose bush, he'll get a pink rose. He questions how no matter what he sows, the ground always accurately grows the same flower or fruit and gives colours to it. He demands to know whether the ground had hidden away colours deep under it in a treasure chest. Finally, he concludes that the ground knows magic!

The author then moves on to talk about how the ground holds firm when the wind blows and protects what's connected to it from falling. That then leads to the poet questioning how the ground flavours its fruits, whether it has mountains of sugar hidden inside to do so and why only the fruits get the sweetness while their leaves are bland.

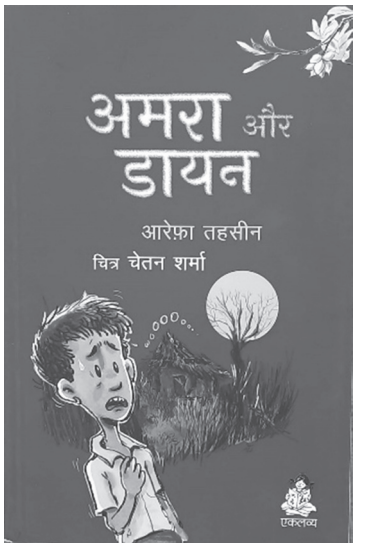
Gulzar presents a contrast of two similar looking plants, the bamboo and sugarcane to denote how the ground is mischievous in its ways towards humans and that it has truly magical abilities. The target audience of the book are children who can read by themselves. The contents will lead them to have several inquisitive thoughts about nature and to find out more about nature on their own. The ability of the poet to induce such questions makes the poetry unputdownable.

Similarly, Shaw adds to the beauty and flow of the poem with his illustrations that are abstractly built together like mosaics or a metaphor for the poem that tries to put 'pieces together' to understand nature. The use of 'hands' in the illustrations to depict the works of the Earth is truly wonderful.

I think this book is a creative masterpiece that tempts you to ask questions that you could easily skip and induces a gratefulness towards the environment when you find the answers.

Bihu Anand

AMRA AUR DAYAN
By Arefa Tehsin. Translated from the original English by Sushil Joshi
Illustrations: Chetan Sharma
Eklavya, 2021, pp. 60, ₹ 65.00



Amra Aur Dayan is the story of a boy of about 10-12 years of age. It is the story of a day when Amra gets a feeling that everything is going to go wrong. In this day full of troubles, he has the company of his friend Virma. The day of troubles is so grave that Amra is forced to visit the hut of '*Jeevti Dayan*'.

The book appears a bit fat at first, but if you start reading, it just grabs you and grips you to itself! You cannot just leave it till you read up to the end. The story also attracts the reader because all that happens in the story is like it happens in real life.

As you read along, there is an unsettling and restless feeling. It is also the restlessness of Amra because everything is going wrong that day. In the midst of this restlessness is also the thought in Amra's mind whether he will get to eat a '*makke ki roti*' at home in the evening.

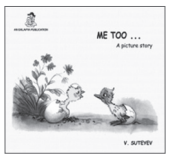
The character of Bhuria Baba in the story is that of a person who has a lot of free space to offer to children. Often, children come there, avoiding the prying eyes of their parents and teachers, without any fear. And Bhuria Baba accepts all children without any questions, without any strings attached!

The hut of the witch (*dayan*), has been mentioned repeatedly in the story. However, as the story progresses, the adventure of going to the hut does not come out enough. Or you can say that the way the story has been crafted, this part does not rouse the curiosity and interest of the reader as it could have. The moment of reaching the hut arrives and goes away—without the reader stopping there to experience it. However, it does soothe the reader to know that no '*dayan*' exists!

The illustrations by Chetan Sharma add to the beauty of the story. Interestingly, when you read about a character in the story and imagine how he or she would be, the illustrations seem quite close to what you imagine. It is amazing how the illustrator has been able to read the author's as well as readers' minds!

This beautiful story has been translated into Hindi by Sushil Joshi. While reading the book, at no point can you make out that you are reading a translation. The language is simple, easy-to-read and beautiful, as if it has been written originally in Hindi.

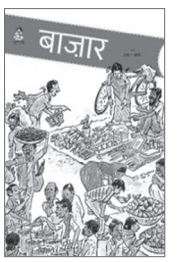
Book News ***Book News***



In *Me too* by V. Suteyev the chick wants to do everything that the duckling does—right then and ditto!! What happens next? A picture story that has entertained young readers since ages, now in the big book format, with repetitive text and a simple story format, for emergent readers to read along.

Eklavya, 2022, pp. 12, ₹ 220.00

Book News ***Book News***

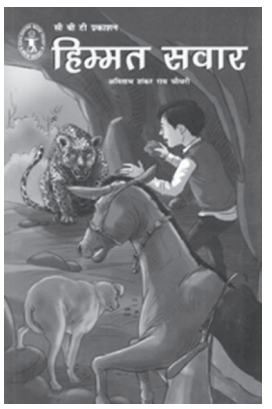


Bazaar (Big Book) by Prashika is about a busy day at the weekly market with happenings. While the Prashika group narrates to us what the day looked like in a lilting poetic expression, Prashant Soni's evocative illustrations bring to life the sounds and smells of the busy market in front of our eyes.

Eklavya, 2021, pp. 12, ₹ 160.00

Aman Nawaz

HIMMAT SAWAR
By Amitabh Shankar Roy Chaudhary. Illustrations: Saurabh Pandey
Children's Book Trust, 2021, pp. 112, ₹ 80.00



Written in the wake of the Kedarnath flash floods of 2013, *Himmat Sawar* gives a fictional twist to the devastating events that unfolded during the flood. A novel for children, the book attempts to initiate a conversation between literature and ecology by bringing together the relationship between humans, animals, and the physical environment. Attributing the floods to anthropogenic interventions, *Himmat Sawar* offers a critique of urbanization and commercialization for a young, impressionable mind, charging us as planetary killers who cannot think beyond our short-term survival. The reader is made aware of how our actions affect nature and how it affects us in return. There are multiple occasions where the reader is made aware of the climatic change as a consequence of man-made actions, attempting to socialize them for a good environment. The narrator says, 'Who can say whether it was the wrath of nature or the result of human ignorance. People celebrate Environment Day once a year with great pomp for the sake of it. But they had no hesitation in cutting down trees in the name of development. As a result of that, there were random big hotels and ashrams standing on the banks of the river everywhere in Uttarakhand. Where does the river's water spread?' (Roy Chaudhary, p. 28)

A tale of bravery and heroism, *Himmat Sawar* is the story of Harjot, the son of a horse provider in Kedarnath, and his horse Sultan, who are lost in the flood and must find ways to survive in circumstances unheard of and unseen before. There also runs in parallel, a story of an Indo-Tibetan soldier, Chakradhari, and a child, Amrit, whose brave acts help save people stranded in a hotel. The book combines eight visuals to completely engross young readers and provide them with a visual language to experience all the key moments of the story. The narrative opens with a description of the typical day of a horse rider who accompanied pilgrims on their journey from Gaurikund to Kedarnath. The characters, who had never experienced a tragedy before, are quickly warned of its impending arrival through various depictions of animals and birds, who soon begin to act strangely, as if warning people of the disaster (p. 24). In the absence of language to talk about a catastrophe unseen by the protagonist, the text resorts to animal imagery again, which at the moment of impact seems like 'many wild elephants had left by breaking the chains, crushing and destroying everything that came under their feet' (p. 27). There is also, running through the book, a subtle agenda of educating children about Hindu mythology through various myths and fables, ranging from stories about Gaurikund and Mandakini to anecdotes from the Mahabharata (p. 16). Harjot's valiant fight with a leopard and jackal, which is equated with Abhimanyu in the Mahabharata (p. 78), and their narrow escape, keeps the readers on edge.

As an adult, reading *Himmat Sawar* reveals how it is peppered with Hindu cultural values in the icons, myths, and imagery that it employs, clearly reflecting its ideological underpinnings. Thus, in addition to instilling the virtue of courage and an awareness of environmental issues, the cultural values of young, susceptible minds are affirmed.

Karuna Amy Guria

MITTI KA ITRA
By Dileep Chinchalkar
Jugnoo, 2022, pp. 98, ₹ 250.00

'Life is akin to an amusement park and birth itself is an entry ticket. Exposure to as many experiences as possible is normal to a person fascinated by life.' The author lived by his words and the book is a testimonial to it. The book presents snippets from his boyhood to adult life and in no particular order. It gives us an essence and a glimpse of what life meant to him. He was fascinated by everything and has put his soul on paper. It is a journal of sorts by a naturalist, a birder, an animal whisperer, a rock collector. His experiences are not mere descriptions, although being a novice birder and rock collector, I did learn a thing or two, but focus on how they made him feel. This is possible because he allows himself to be touched by everything.

The author loves telling his stories. He is curious and explores tirelessly. He talks of people that he met who have made an impression on him, people who accompanied him on his various expeditions or other luminaries from art fields, friends of his father. Especially, his father seems to have had a positive influence on him. The narrative follows his explorations and expeditions and presents some unforgettable stories.

When picking up the book, I did not know what to expect from the title. But what better time to be reading this book than in the monsoon. While reading I kept guessing that the author's favourite season has to be the rains for the life teeming up at every nook and corner of our surroundings. As a person who has recently been caught in awe of rocks and birds and wildflowers, it was a timely read and there was so much that I could relate to. Chinchalkar writes about his nostalgia of younger days, fond memories of his father, and with equal enthusiasm about animals, trees, rocks, strangers he met or acquaintances he had made along his various journeys. My new found love for rocks and wildflowers did pique me in some segments of the book.

Captivating titles to his anecdotes have you speculating about his meanderings and what fascinated him each time. He writes in fragments and they are excerpts from his diary. Not just his encounters with nature's bounty but something that is experienced deeply. His sense of wonder never fails him. His Van Goghish illustrations are dense and blend seamlessly with the text. The stunning ones show his favourites.

This book could be a tribute to his life, not events of grandiose but of different shades—like a lazy day spent sitting under his favourite neem tree. For him digging deep into the history of the being of the living and the non-living, watching and listening and touching is the only way of knowing. He vicariously experiences what it means to be one with nature. He does not run out of metaphors to express his feelings.

It is a comfort read, with personal stories and reflection questions—a great book for anyone who needs a reminder to look for joy in tiny things, rather in nature's bounty around us. It implores its readers to delve deeper into their observations and be mindful of things that surround them.

Kunwar Singh

BANA BANAYA DEKHA AAKASH, BANTE KAHAN DIKHA AAKASH

By Vinod Kumar Shukla. Illustrations: Taposhi Ghoshal

Jugnoo, 2022, pp. 64, ₹ 200.00

When I was to select a book for reviewing, the title *Bana Banaya Dekha Aakash, Bante Kahan Dikha Aakash* itself drew me towards this book. As if it was asking me, 'Have you ever seen something like this?' And the cover illustration too appears to have assimilated all living and non-living beings into the folds of the sky.

The book is a collection of 49 poems. Poems that give a kind of stability and foot-holding that we often experience while we are at home, among our own people—family members, relatives, friends, neighbours—chatting with or working together or making plans for the future. Talking of things that everyone can make a sense of—the rivers and streams, the farm and the cattle and fodder, the home and the forest... and the list goes on. Experiencing togetherness with the rickshaw-puller, vegetable vendor, uncle, aunt, siblings, friends, grand-parents and so on. And caring for each other. It is that kind of a sense of belongingness and calm that these poems bring to the reader.

While reading the poems, I stopped often to think, and to let my mind wander off. And then I came back to the poems and read them again. What is said in these poems seemed so simple and straightforward. But who, other than a poet like Vinod Kumar Shukla, thinks like that? Who stops to pay attention to the simple things of everyday life with so much love and care?

The poems give a lot of space for interpretations too. You can make sense of what is written in your own way. In fact, the poems create meaning when the understanding and knowledge of the reader is added to the written words in the process of interpretation. And this co-creation of meaning makes them even more powerful as literature. What then is the need to search of what the poet meant, if what you co-create with the poet is so satisfying?

See this piece for example:

चिड़ियों का घोसला बना पहले
या मनुष्य का पहले घर?
चिड़ियों ने बनाया होगा घोसला पहले!
मनुष्य ने तो बनी–बनाई
पहाड़ की गुफा में रहकर
घर को जाना....

(Was the bird's nest made first/ or did man's house come first?/ Surely the birds must have built nests first/ Man after all made the existent cave his dwelling and called it home.)

Or this one:

आपस में न टकाराएँ तो भी
पत्थर टूटते हैं–
यदि कोई टक्कर दे
तो टूट–टूटकर एक बड़ी चट्टान
कंकड़ – पत्थर है.....

(Even if they do not crash into one another,/ stones do break/ If someone rams into it/ even a huge boulder/ breaks into mere rubble…)

The minute details with which the poet observes nature around him, and the humility and compassion are exemplary. However, we as humans have stopped appreciating nature in this way because of our arrogance and conceit. Since childhood, we are expected to run the race of achievements. Then, as adolescents, who has the time or vision to stop by and watch—with patience, care and concern—what goes on in nature around us, to be in the moment and soak it all in?

When a child is asked to speak for two minutes in a language class, she is clueless. But when you read these poems, you see that everything is right there in front of our eyes. Things like hills, forests, rivers, streams, sun, moon, house, rickshaw, day, evening, night—all that we can talk endlessly about. Only if we stop by to see!

Taposhi Ghoshal's illustrations flow with the poems. For those among us who claim that they cannot understand poetry, these illustrations serve as friendly support that will tenderly take you to the core of the poems. The book is not only a journey of thoughtful poems, but also a journey of beautiful and evocative imagery.

There is only one thing that disturbed me while reading the book. The titles of the poems are not mentioned in the inner pages. They are given only in the content list. So, when you like a poem and want to remember it, the title gives you a scaffold that helps you to remember. To find that scaffold, you have to turn back the pages. That is annoying and could have been avoided simply by giving the titles in the inner pages too.

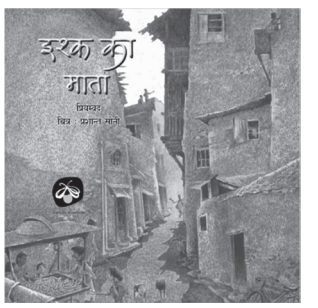
Ektara books are usually situated towards the expensive bracket of the market. So, that also remains a concern.

Manika Kukreja

ISHQ KA MATA

By Priyamvad. Illustrations: Prashant Soni

Jugnoo, 2022, pp. 50, ₹ 175.00



On hearing the word melancholia, I imagine—crooning of a musical instrument, the sound of the rain, evenings spent in solitude, sailing on the boat during sunset, reading a pensive book, having a conversation with a person who lends an open ear and objective mind, watching sky change its colour, gazing stars under the night sky. These moments are backed by humble feelings of the unknown, of 'something out in the region that I understand'. They create memories and mental images in the mind. The book, *Ishq ka Mata* is that mood.

Have you come across texts that transport you to a different time, to a different place? Siting hundreds of kilometers away from home, while reading these stories, I found myself in company of people from different regions, in simple and familiar yet rich Hindi words and sounds. This is a collection of six short stories that culminates with the story named 'Ishq Ka Mata', sharing its name with the book.

These are stories of knowing someone, of memories, of curiosity, of fear, remorse and repentance, of life and of death. The writer has created characters after careful observation of people. A melancholic mood is scented through the actions of characters. These characters are us in our lives, us–who we were when we were children, us who we are for our thoughts and anxieties for future. Characters in these stories are our windows and mirrors.

What is exciting for me in this text is that a sort of a magical

world is created. Stories often do that, word by word they build a world which is a reflection of ours but with a twist of 'what else is possible', adding a perspective that we haven't yet thought about. It is a real and yet alternative world where unthinkable things are possible, the unsaid rules that we adhere to can be bent here.

Recently I had the opportunity to attend a storytelling event where the performer created this magical world through her performance. This was aimed for children. Some of the classic western English children's stories were taken. Later, there was time for interaction with the audience–children–when the storyteller was open to answer questions. This was a crucial point for me, the questions helped us explore more, think deeply and share our ideas with others. Here was a chance to weave into the magical world that had just been created. However, no such thing happened in the event! The questions were answered in a logical pattern so that the listener's interaction with exploration of new ideas was shielded by answers they got.

These stories in the book, on the other hand, do capture such characters who propagate this magic. Where answers do not end curiosity but add fuel to it. One such instance is when Ishq Mata, a wandering philosopher, replies to a question by proposing that language is a human construct, we should be able to use it as we want rather than relying on its rules. He goes on to explain that god has a language that it talks in. It is through many things around us—the flower that bloomed with a bright colour beautifully even though flowers around it in the same plant didn't, why is it so? What is mama bird telling the baby birds? Why do fishes come up to the surface of water time and again, what do they say? A response that created space for diving further, opening up possibilities of an alternative reality, thinking out of the box.

It is not just windows to the ideas of a new world but also a reflection of memories that are stimulated through the stories. One of the stories talks directly about us reaching out to these memories in our lonesome times: *'jab hamare paas koi nahi hota toh yaadein hoti hain, hamaraa saath deti hain'*. Memories that give us warmth and support during difficult moments.

This book makes me more aware of my surroundings and inspires me to stop in my rushing life and observe my surroundings, talk to people and listen to their experiences, their concerns. Share these stories with my students and talk about language and life to dwell into the discussion. I believe someone who enjoys reflecting, quiet time, and has fondness for Hindi language would really enjoy reading the stories. I would recommend reading the stories with young adults and having discussions on the topics. It would be a strong conversation opener and immersion to various cultures.

End note: Since the moment I saw the title, I was wondering if I was reading it correct. I now know that yes it is indeed *Ishq KA Mata*, I have been reading it correct all along and there is a reason for it to have a '*ka*' which has a reference in the last story.

Manoj Nigam

GHODA AUR ANYA KAHANIYAN
By Vinod Kumar Shukla. Illustrations: Atanu Roy
Jugnoo, 2022, pp. 56, ₹ 175.00

Vinod Kumar Shukla's *Ghoda aur Anya Kahaniyan* has six stories apart from the one titled 'Ghoda'. These are : 'Bahiya', 'Cinema Line', 'Heera', 'Kotwar', 'Sacchai ki duniya' and 'Gali-mohalle ki Jalvayu'.

'Bahiya', alias a madman, replies to all questions people ask him in a particular pattern. The mystery of his unique ways and the pattern of his answering questions is revealed later in the story. Taposhi Ghoshal's illustrations present a particular image of Bahiya. Another image of Bahiya is etched in the reader's minds in the process of reading. Interestingly, these two images of Bahiya walk together as we move with the story, and then much beyond it.

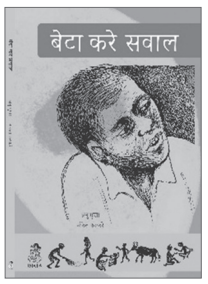
The story 'Cinema Line' depicts the age-old social fabric of the surroundings of Krishna Talkies of Nandgaon. Images of being found asleep—legs atop the front row chairs and the rest of the body cuddled up on the cinema hall chair, pulling out the sofa springs to tie them with slippers and enjoy the springy jumps, come alive in this story. How often do we come across characters like Fulesar dai, Operator Gaffar and Gate-keeper Konda these days? The story also brings forth the idea of seeing life with the gaze of a film-watcher. Taposhi Ghoshal and Barkha Lohia's illustrations attempt to do just that.

'Horse', there was one. Black, grey and white—the colours lived with him. If you saw the horse from one angle, you could see only one colour. There were so many angles from where you could not see. So, if you tried to see from the angle of invisibility, then as a reader you could see something emerging clear in your mind from the haziness that you see. Priya Kurien's illustrations walk the story with you giving you a nostalgic feeling–and also a parallel sense of images revealing themselves in the midst of haze.

It is rare that one comes across such stories. It is Vinod Kumar Shukla's unique ability to weave simple words and sentences to take the readers to a different level altogether. These memoirs carry minute observations, the magic of words and small sentences with deep meanings. Readers can experience an array of emotions like happiness, sadness, humane-ness and so on. The experience is so deep, you just cannot skip any sentences. If you do, you just have to go back and read it.

Priya Kurien's cover printed on 250 gsm FBB is attractive and holds your eye. The production quality of this square book, printed on 120 gsm natural shade paper, is very good. For those young adult readers who can read fluently in Hindi, and for all above that age group—this book can give a new leap to their thought and imagination.

Book News ***Book News***



Beta Kare Sawal by Anu Gupta and Sanket Karkare as the title aptly puts, is a book that is an outcome of the effort to invite, acknowledge and respond to questions and curiosities of young adult boys. The questions surround human anatomy and other physical, social and emotional aspects of their lives; including the questions that are tabooed, silenced or ignored by the adults and the society.

Eklavya, 2022, p. 142, ₹ 260.00

The Past and Present of Children's Literature in Marathi

By Madhuri Purandare

Around five-six years ago, it would have been easy to say that nothing was happening in the world of Marathi children's literature. I would have simply left my comment at that. But since the situation today has changed, it needs a mention as well. It is high time that we acknowledge the bits and pieces of contributions and explorations, initiated and ongoing despite the odds.

There was a deep silence in the field of children's literature at the time when I started working. Be it the writers, publishers or buyers, no one was interested to hear or say a word about it, let alone to give it a thought. A discrete community of 'children's books illustrators' hadn't yet been born.

During my childhood days, the situation was not so bad. Not only were there children's books, but magazines as well. They only had an illustration or two, in black and white. There used to be some really great plays for children. Writers such as BR Bhagwat, Leelawati Bhagwat, ND Tamhankar, Sane Guruji would mostly write for children. There were a few others who didn't write that frequently for children, but made sure to contribute, and whenever they did, it was all great work. This community had eminent authors such as CV Joshi, Sai Paranjape, Vijay Tendulkar, Vinda Karandikar, Mangesh Padgaonkar, Durga Bhagwat, Vyankatesh Madgulkar, GA Kulkarni, Shanta Shelke, Acharya Atre, and Vinoba Bhave among others. Consequently, from an early age, our interest was also drawn towards literature written for adults. Interestingly, no one stopped or discouraged us from reading these works or asked us to wait until we turned 18 to read them, and thus, our journey with books continued uninterrupted.

The decade of the 1960s witnessed a paradigm-shift in literature, with the emerging community of rebellious writers. The rise of Dalit literature almost brought a (much needed) earthquake. But in this turn of events, it was as if everyone had forgotten about children's literature which could have evolved with the changing times, if any of those authors had written for children. Magazines for children had closed shop, and there was a dry spell in the creation of new literature. Publishers would say: 'There are no buyers for children's books.' Writers would say, 'Why should we write for children, when there is no fame, name or money?' Children would say, 'Why would we read these old-outdated books? There's nothing in there for us; neither our language nor our concerns and not happiness either.'

At such times, one feels hopeless. And then come the indicators of a new beginning. There's always someone, with fresh and innovative thoughts, set to explore new directions, to do something new! Today there are interesting things happening in the world of Marathi children's literature. Children's magazines have restarted. Young authors and illustrators are attracted to join the field. There are publishers such as Jyotsna Prakashan, Pratham Books, Rohan Prakashan, Tata Trust's Parag Initiative, and more publishers now coming up with new ideas. Books are being published in Marathi dialects, in the Adivasi tongues of Maharashtra. There is an increase in the number of people who understand the importance of having these books.

Of course, this is just the beginning. We have to keep working. I see young artists asking, there's so much happening in children's literature across the world, why can't we do similar work? Honestly, this question answers everything for me and sums up what I set out to share: there's hope!

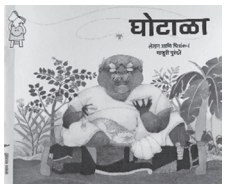
Amrita Patwardhan

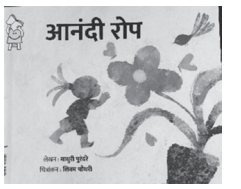
GRADED READERS IN MARATHI

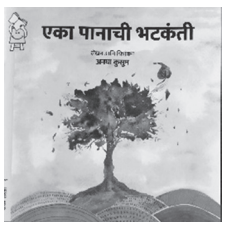
By Madhuri Purandare, Manjiri Nimbkar, Anagha Kusum, Makarand Dambhare, Chinmay Dharurkar and others. Illustrations: Madhuri Purandare, Makarand Dambhare, Shivam Chaudhari, Onkar Mahashabde, Gauri Katdare, and others

Pratham Books, 2022, Set of 30 books, pp. 12/16,

Price range: ₹ 55 to 60 per book







This series of 30 early grade readers has been developed in Marathi by Pratham Books to support guided and independent reading in grades 1-3, when children are learning to read.

It is now widely recognized by educationists (though not practiced in most of our schools) that textbooks alone are insufficient for teaching learning of language and literacy. The important role of storybooks and good literature in language acquisition as well as holistic development of the child cannot be over-emphasized. Literature with good stories and varied content is critical for developing interest and widening exposure. Alongside, children also need books which they can use for practicing their newly developing reading skill. These books need to be close to the child's reading level in terms of *akshara, matras* they are learning, and graded readers can play an important role for that. Given the purpose, graded readers are not to be evaluated from the point of view of their rich literary quality, layered text and depth of a story. Nevertheless, good, graded readers need to work in terms of their theme, language, illustrations and production quality.

This review of the graded reader series by Pratham books examines the same. The series is guest edited by the well-known writer, illustrator and the Big Little Book Award[1] winner, Madhuri Purandare and the guest art director is Pallavi Jain. Most books are of 8+4 pages, and some are 12+4 pages, with word count between 30 to 50 words.

The themes used are relatable, fun and many are high on humour. This helps engage the reader, and it is a relief that no book talks down at children and certainly does not have any moralistic tone or takeaways. They include family, relationships, friends, nature, animals, play, patterns, exploration of the neighbourhood and little things that happen around children which interest them. This is a strength of the series. Books that especially work well are *Ghotala*, and *Aata Ka*, *Mahit Naahi* written and illustrated by Madhuri Purandare, *Abaa* written by Manjiri Nimbkar, illustrated by Omkar Mahashabde, *Eka Paanachi Bhatakanti* written and illustrated by Anagha Kusum, *Hatanchi Gammat* written and illustrated by

1. https://www.paragreads.in/parag-nurtures/big-little-book-award/blba-2016/

Makarand Dambhare, and *Mukhavata* written by Madhuri Purandare and illustrated by Omkar Mahashabde.

Graded books are meant for guided reading and independent reading of children who are in early stages of learning to read and write. Hence, simple text with limited, familiar *matras,* short and limited number of sentences are advisable. Most books have very short sentences with limited or no *samyuktaksharas* (conjunct consonants). However, some books have a large number of unfamiliar words including *samyuktaksharas* e.g., *Gatttam Chattam: Marathi Malayalam Badbadgeet (*written by Chinmay Dharurkar*)* and *Chaltundi, Padtundi: Marathi-Telugu Badbadgeet* (also written by Chinmay Dharurkar*)* and the purpose of the same is not clear. On account of being very short, the sentences in some books are contrived. However, overall, most books are easy to read.

Both established and new illustrators have contributed to this series and with varying illustration styles ranging from realistic, line drawings, stylized, detail oriented and bold. Most books have engaging illustrations that will support a child's reading process and also draw children in. Illustrations that work very well include titles like *Ghotala* and *Naahi Mahit* (by Madhuri Purandare) as well as emerging illustrators like Shivam Chaudhari (an alumnus of *Riyaaz* illustrator's academy) for the book titled *Anandi Rop.* Some of the books using comic style and digital art leave a lot to be desired (e.g., *Kaay Anale* illustrated by Gauri Katdare or *Karanje* illustrated by Shirish Ghadage or *Maaze Jawalche Mitra* illustrated by Rishabh Bhankar).

The series is based on 'Levelling Books for Guided Reading in Grades 1-3' by Pratham Books, authored by Menon and Jeurkar, 2021, as part of the Foundational Literacy Programme. However, the series does not cross-reference or introduce the levelling framework and hence, the primary objective of the early grade series, which is to support literacy acquisition, is not made explicit anywhere. It would be useful to state this clearly on the books for correct positioning and use.

In the past, we have seen a limited number of graded readers published in Indian languages. The most well-known and with the widest reach is the Barkha series: 40 graded supplementary readers published by the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT). Another excellent graded reader series continues to be Chala Vachu*ya* (Lets Read)[2] series developed by the Centre for Learning Resource, Pune: 10 graded readers in Marathi that have extremely simple language and yet highly readable text and stories, and Children's Language and Interest (CLI) series[3]: 18 books published by Eklavya, Bhopal which has small-sized books written by Arun Thakkar and beautifully illustrated by Rav Bael, depicting the many small joys and fun in children's everyday lives.

In conclusion, the early grade reader set of 30 picture books developed by Pratham Books in Marathi is a welcome addition to the limited but growing pool of graded readers in Indian languages. Quality of books in the series, understandably, had variation with about 25% books in the series being excellent in terms of writing and illustrations and about 50% being good overall. The remaining do need some creative rethinking. However, with the majority of the books in the series falling in the first two categories, this would be a useful resource for literacy instruction in classrooms.

2. https://clrindia.org/foundational-literacy-and-numeracy-fln/

3. https://www.pitarakart.in/cli-set-of-18-books-children's-language-and-intestests-reading-programme

Children's Literature in Telugu

K Suresh

Children's Literature in Telugu is said to have had a golden period during the decades of 1960s and 1970s when a monthly magazine *Chandamama* was very popular. It was published in more than ten Indian languages. It had a fairly common structure with two-three serials, a Vikram and Vetal story and other stories dealing with test of honesty, cleverness and spontaneity, finding a successor to the throne or a bride for the son.

Otherwise, the mainstay for children's books has been stories from *Panchatantra*, *Aesop's Fables*, the epics and mythology. There were stories of Tenali Ramalinga, Akbar-Birbal, Mulla Nasruddin, Paramanandayya's students from the genre of humour and wit. Stories of kings and villains trying for magical powers were common.

The other major writings for children were poetry and action poems. One of the forms was '*satakam*'—a collection of 100 verses. Each verse was of four lines with the fourth line being common, normally having the name of the writer. *Vemana Satakam* is one example under this genre. Each verse has a message about what is right and wrong and about human nature, worldly ways, etc. Traditional children's rhymes whose authors are not known were popular and are in circulation even now.

There are some original prose and poetry writers of that period but, in my opinion, none that could stand the test of time. It seems that around the time of Independence almost all the popular children's books were translated into Telugu. *Arabian Nights* and fairy tale collections by Grimms brothers and Anderson were very popular. Other popular translations are *Sindbad the Sailor, Gulliver's Travels, Robinson Crusoe, Robinhood*, etc. Even novels like *Treasure Island, Call of the Wild, Bambi, Pinocchio, Alice in Wonderland* were translated.

From the 1960s, the Soviet children's books entertained countless people for almost two decades. These were large books with beautiful colour pictures and very low prices. They created generations of readers and inspired many artists. During the same period, the contributions of Nehru Bal Pustakalaya (National Book Trust), Children's Book Trust and (the then) AP Balala Academy have also been commendable.

With the closure of children's magazines, there are not many avenues for authors to get their stories published, other than children's pages/sections in various daily newspapers and weekly magazines. These sections have various activities and puzzles for children, information titbits, a drawing by children and a story. This story with an illustration is often limited to 100 to 200 words. The authors are forced with no choice but to fit into this pattern.

The other major disturbing trend is that the children's stories MUST have a moral at the end. The expectation of the adults (i.e., parents, teachers and 'well-wishers') is that the child should learn something from a story. This has robbed the fun, humour, excitement and adventure of children's stories in Telugu.

While most of the authors and publishers are focusing on the pedagogical content of the writings for children, nobody is bothered about the various studies and surveys revealing that reading skills in Telugu (as with other languages) are poor.

As the market for children's books in Telugu is limited, publishers are not able to invest in quality illustrations, design, editing, etc. It is in this scenario that Manchi Pustakam was registered as a public charitable Trust in 2004 with the objective of publishing and promoting children's books in Telugu. However, the journey

precedes with 'Bala Sahiti', a Trust with similar objectives formed in 1989 when four friends felt the need for an organization focusing on children's books in Telugu.

Manchi Pustakam has published nearly 350 books during the last 18 years. The books are under the categories of fiction (Story, Picture Story, Novel, Poems), Science, History, Life Skills, etc. Some books are in bilingual (Telugu-English) format. They also publish books on education for teachers and adults (www.manchipustakam.in). The objective is to promote reading and readers and the is focus is on developing children's reading proficiency in Telugu.

Some objectives of Manchi Pustakam:

Participating in book fairs we focus on interacting with parents to identify age-appropriate reading material for their children; help teachers in building libraries for their schools and suggest activities around the library; help donors and philanthropists in identifying books for donating to school and general libraries.

The problems faced:

Lack of good quality original writings and writers in Telugu and lack of illustrators; no credible book distribution system in the Telugu States. Further, the demand for English as the medium of instruction and governments also opting for the same is eroding the Telugu reading culture.

Pavithra VS

EE LADDOOLU EKKADIVI?
By Venu Gopalakrishna. Illustrations: Deeptanshu Sanyal

THAAP!
By Gayathri Vennela

NENU
By Siri Mallika

EMI CHESTHAARU? EMEMI CHESTHAARU?
By Sammeta Umadevi. Illustrations: M. Srikanth

BANGARU KONDA
By Dr. Jasthi Sivaramakrishna. Illustrations: Babu Dundrapelli

YAATRA
By Kiran Jammalamadaka. Illustrations: Raahak

MAA PILLIKI LEKKALOCCHU
By Dasari Venkataramana. Illustrations: Sunitha Vasu

CHINNOO–PICCHUKA
By Kanneganti Anasuya. Illustrations: Jayadev

AA GADILO EMUNDI?
By Amara Jyothi. Illustrations: Hema Bhagyalakshmi

CAMPING
By V. Shanthi Prabodha. Illustrations: Tumbali Shivaji
All Manchi Pustakam, 2021, pp. 24, ₹ 45.00 each

A painting could be worth a thousand words but a picture book is worth much more, since the illustrations contribute much more to the story than the text. A series of ten Telugu picture books was published by Manchi Pustakam in association with Telugu Association of North America (TANA) in November 2021. Each of these books, adorned with colourful illustrations, is twenty-four pages long. Here is a sneak peek into what the books have in store for the readers.

It's a rarity to have a child illustrate and write a children's picture book. *Thaap!* (తాప్!), written by 13-year old Gayathri Vennela is a counting picture book that interestingly traces the journey of ten bubbles as they float where the wind takes them before they pop. The thoughtfully done illustrations and page borders complement the text in the book. What appealed to me the most in this book is the fact that this teenager leaves us with a pearl of wisdom in the end.

Venu Gopalakrishna extends an invitation to visit his alternative school 'farm hill' through his book 'Where are these laddoos from?' (ఈ లడ్డూలు ఎక్కడివి?; *Ee Laddoolu Ekkadivi?).* The invitation also gets transformed into a field-to-platter chain through conversations of children in the story. Also, it gives us a recipe of delectable laddoos that can be tried at home every time you make ghee. Deeptanshu's effort to portray the characters and the school as is, is commendable. The author shares that the idea of this book was born from his conversations with children in his school. Having been a teacher in a school close to nature, I felt an urge to visit this school and spend a night in the tree house the book mentions.

'Me' (నేను; *Nenu*) is another picture book illustrated and written by an eleven-year-old. In the book, Siri Mallika takes the reader on a journey to give a zoomed out picture of where she lives in the universe. But, why is the book titled 'Me'? It's for you to look for clues the cover page offers, to make connections and guess. What I loved about the illustrations is the attention to detail Siri has. The shrinking size of the girl's silhouette as one flips through the pages, and as she takes us out into the universe is a testimonial to the same.

Curiosity takes charge when we have been asked not to do something and encourages us to try it out at any cost. That's what Babloo in the story 'What's in that room?' (ఆ గదిలో ఏముంది?; *Aa Gadilo Emundi?*) experiences in his grandparent's house. He plays Holmes to find out what secret lies in the room under the stairs. He starts imagining it to be a treasure trove with gold and jewels, cartons of toys and tons of other things. What does it actually turn out to be? This book written by Amara Jyothi and illustrated by Hema is sure to make you relive your childhood memories of time spent in your grandparents' home. I liked the way the author creates interest right from the cover page and how she discloses the secret in a crisp manner.

Kanneganti Anausuya makes an attempt to draw children closer to nature through her story 'Chinnoo-Sparrow' (చిన్నూ- పిచ్చుక; *Chinnoo-Picchuka*). A little boy is drawn towards an injured sparrow and feels compelled to take care of it. Once the bird flies away, he looks for ideas to invite birds home every day. That's when his grandfather comes to his rescue with an organic bird feeder. How the installation of this bird feeder becomes an influential idea amongst Chinnoo's friends and how they in turn become closer to their feathered friends is the plot around which the story is built. Pictures by veteran cartoonist Jayadev aid us in imagining what is possible in our backyards too.

Through *Camping* (క్యాంపింగ్), author Shanti Prabodha and illustrator Tumbali Sivaji make us experience a night in the forest vicariously. The six-year-old in the story is known for shooting questions at his parents like any other child. His 'why's and 'how's keep increasing as they approach the camping site and he starts experiencing fireflies, star-studded skies and animals in the wild for the first time. The author shares that she drew inspiration for this book from her personal experience of camping with her grandson. Camping in the jungle could have been spiced up with a few more twists and turns to make it a little more interesting.

'Our Cat Can Do Math' (మా పిల్లికి లెక్కలొచ్చు; *Maa Pilliki Lekkalocchu*): This unusual title by Dasari Venkataramana is bound to pique our curiosity to know how a cat could possibly know Math. Isn't it? Through the characters in the story, the author tries to

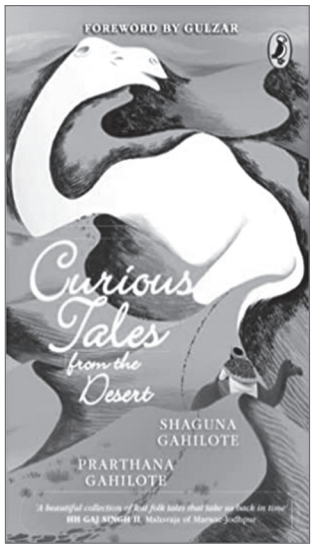
address the fear most kids would have for Math. A mother cat who is in search of its kittens plays an important role in making Bharath feel at ease with his Math homework. Illustrations by Suneetha Vasu needs a special mention as they bring alive the emotions that little Bharath goes through, in the story.

Time travel is undeniably an all-time hit with kids and adults alike. Kiran Jammalamadaka handles this sci-fi picture book, 'Journey' (యాత్ర; *Yaatra*), with care as he captivates young readers with worm holes, possibility of time travel and gradually turns the tale to present the pros and cons of using gadgets in our lives. Without getting preachy, Kiran deals with the idea of how excessive use of screens can impact our lives in future. Raahak's delightful oil pastel illustrations add colour to this journey. Of all the books in the series, from the lens of a gripping plot and keeping the readers glued till the end, *Yaatra* does a great job. It left me with a hook to imagine the sequel to this book.

A usual question children get asked is 'What would you like to be, when you grow up?' Through the same question, a teacher draws the attention of a mischievous class towards what little things they can possibly do now. "What will you do?" (ఏమి చేస్తారు? ఏమేమి చేస్తారు?; *Emi Chestaaru? Ememi Chestaaru?*) encourages them in contributing to a make-over of the school and its surroundings. Author Umadevi and illustrator Srikanth team up in showing young readers how strong-willed children can pave a way to big changes. However, if I were the author, I would have tried picking a couple of issues from the class's context and focused on weaving gradual changes in those alone through my story. I felt that portraying a host of changes leading to a complete make-over of the school and the children's behaviour made it seem less realistic.

Ravi lives in the United States and has come to his grandparents' place for vacation. He is intrigued by a variety of folk artists who are around during the festive season of Makara Sankranti. His conversations with the village folk reveal to us his wish to dress up like the folk artists and become one of them when he grows up. Siva Ramakrishna has chosen 'Apple of my eye' (బంగారు కొండ; *Bangaaru Konda*) to introduce many disappearing Telugu art forms to the generations to come. Babu Dandrupelli's pictures are a true reflection of how these artists look in real life. It is quite informative in introducing 20 different art forms to children. Nevertheless, for a young reader after reading a few of them, the pattern of narration might seem a little monotonous. Introducing a few of these artforms in a story with the backdrop of a village fair and saving the others for the next book could have been another way to treat the same subject.

Book News ***Book News***



Curious Tales from the Desert by Shaguna Gahilote and Prarthana Gahilote tells the stories of a magical sparrow that resides deep in the wild jungles of Rajasthan and that grants wishes; in Gujarat, a pandit haggles with vendors and chastises merchants as he chases an elusive bargain; a bullocky in Multan encounters a mysterious and wise old man who charges money to talk; a pandemonium of fools, geniuses and everyone in between gambol across the deserts of India to amusing and delightful results.

Puffin, 2022, pp. 224, ₹ 299.00

An Aching Muse on Children's Literature in Bangla

By Proiti Roy

If I recall my childhood, we grew up surrounded by books, books of all kinds. Many of them had beautiful illustrations. Children and books were as if integrated.

There were many authors in Bangla who used to write for children and all were among the established ones such as Upendra Kishore Roy Choudhury, Leela Majumdar, Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, Tarasankar Bandopadhyay, Sukumar Ray, Sharad Chandra Chattopadhyay. Then there were remarkable illustrators like Narayan Debnath (who created the immortal character of Batul the great and Handa-Bhonda), Purnendu Potri, Krishnendu Chaki.

Historically, Bengal has had a rich tradition of literature and readership. But in recent times there has been a change in the trend, in films, music and literature, owing to the current socio-political scenario. Unfortunately, the change is not very healthy.

Yet another change is in the life-style and priorities. It has affected both creation of literature and readership. Books are no more a close and an important part of children's lives. The distractions are far too many and the expectations of parents and society too have a role to play in this shift.

Speaking of content and creation of literature, there are a few publishers in Bangla like Deb Sahitya Kutir, Thema and Anand Bazar publication, who are publishing for children, but they mostly re-publish classics, which are sometimes re-illustrated. Another trend that I saw at Kolkata Book Fair is that the children's books section is mostly populated with activity books, colouring books and nursery rhymes and the re-published classics, illustrated using commonly available digital stock images. In the past few years, I do not remember having come across a single book in Bangla that is new and noticeable.

SO MANY LEAVES

By Harini Nagendra and Seema Mundoli. Illustrations: Barkha Lohia

Pratham Books, 2021, pp. 16, ₹ 50.00

The authors give us a plethora of information on leaves—their shape and sizes. Cleverly associated with the images with everyday objects, other flora and fauna like fingernails, plates, peacock feathers etc., the identity and description remain in the minds of the young. The visuals are interspersed with information that tells you the uses of leaves like squirrels use grass to make nests, and goats eat jackfruit leaves. Apart from the nature of the leaves the child learns that while some can be eaten, others can be used in various ways. While some taste good, others are poisonous.

There are some fun activities listed at the end of the book.

UI

There are publishers like Pratham and Tulika, who publish Bangla editions of their books, but these books are not visible in the market. They are not reaching the children, except for those who have access to big malls or book stores. Here, I am mainly talking about the need for good books to reach the small towns, local and independent bookshops.

This scene makes me sad. The kind of books that I do for publishers like Ektara and Eklavya are nowhere to be seen. My friends from Bengal are amazed to find such great work happening in Hindi. In Bengal, it seems as if children's literature has been taken for granted. The need for a change was not realized until recently and there is still a struggle in letting go of past glory.

As I see, it is not only the matter of changing the marketing strategies that holds key to bring a change, though that is an important area too. But, in addition, the community of readers, and especially the parents, teachers and schools too have a role to play. Until now, neither of them has shown much interest and enthusiasm towards children's books. This group does hold a potential to bring the shift in the current situation.

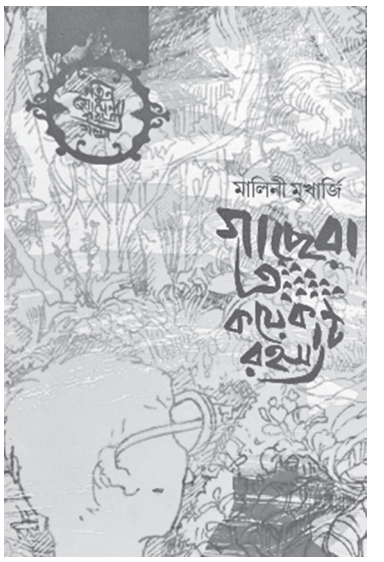
Proma Basu Roy

GAACHHERA O KOYEKTI RAHASHYA (TREES AND A FEW MYSTERIES): STORIES THAT SPEAK

By Malini Mukherjee

Lyriqal Books, 2021, pp. 59, ₹ 170.00

A few months ago, I watched the film *Back to the Future*, an American science fiction film made in three parts. There, the protagonist, Marty, and his friend move across time and space, to the future to save lives and to the past for solving scientific experiments that have gone askew. Science fiction has been a part of various art forms in the West for centuries. In Bengali literature, it hasn't been far behind, and the origin dates back to the 19th century. Of many writers, this genre has been made most popular through the Professor Shanku series written by Satyajit Ray, a science fiction combined with fantasy and travelogue.



In *Gaachhera O Koyekti Rahashya*, author Malini Mukherjee writes in her dedication that the book emerged from her son wanting to read more of Professor Shanku and Feluda (mysteries, also by Ray) kind of stories. Clearly, the impact of this genre and the fictional characters are a part of many readers' lives, across generations.

This book for older readers and young adults, is set much in the future with references to the past which in 2022 is also the future. Dr. Palash, the protagonist, a student of botany, travels through time for a quest that leads to a mystery. The book is written in three chapters. In the opening chapter, 'Eden', the author takes Dr. Palash to Daltonganj and Giridih, home of Professor Shanku, and immerses the reader in his secret diary. It is almost as if Mukherjee is revealing the secrets crafted by Ray, connecting space and time, after all these years. The following two chapters are 'Sakshi' (Witness) set in Norway, and 'Shikor' (Roots) in the Andaman Islands. 'Good fiction is always about story first and information second or a by-product, a telling that is based on imagination as well as research, and these signify the literary value' (Ray in an interview, *Akashvani* Kolkata, 1982). This book is certainly one such.

And trees form the fulcrum of the book. Mukherjee exposes us to a range of species that are extinct or about to be. She personifies them in a way to tell us how they hold human traits, can be relied on, and places them at significant points as witnesses to changes and as fortune-tellers in the narrative. What she is actually trying to offer is a word of caution, probing the reader to think about exploitation of nature, modifying genes, fabrication and mindless choices that humans have been making out of a sense of supreme entitlement, withdrawing ourselves from the natural ecosystem.

Interestingly, the stories are written as pieces from Dr. Palash's journal. Another semblance in style to the diaries of Professor Shanku. Significant to note, they have days, months and time of the day, but not year. Not locating them in specific time brackets leaves much to the readers' imagination, and perhaps renders a longer life to the book. Mukherjee's literary abilities are profound, powerful yet tender. Each story flows into a gradual crescendo and weaves in a value note which in no way is moral or binary, but beautiful, upright and dignified.

However, after reading the book, I missed an acknowledgement section. It would have been nice if the author had culled out the works of Ray, especially Professor Shanku, that apparently form the basis of this book. Also mentioning the research she has done for the book could be a source of information to those interested and a way to steer readers to relevant information that supplements the fundamental point she is trying to voice through the stories.

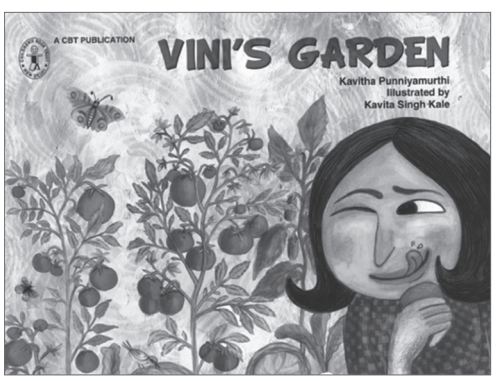
The present scenario of children's books in Bengali is not a thriving one. Bulk of it still rests on writings by stellar authors from decades ago, fairy tales and folktales. Contemporary voices are hard to come by in the shelves of most publishers in Bengal, and some largely remain didactic. The approach to writing and publishing thus needs to be refreshed urgently. Like Dr. Palash and Marty, the story of Bengali children's literature perhaps has to go 'back to the future'

VINI'S GARDEN

By Kavitha Punniyamurthi. Illustrations: Kavita Singh Kale

Children's Book Trust, 2022, pp.16, ₹ 60.00

'I want to grow a garden, Nani', says Vini. Nani takes her to the market and buys seeds. And so, begins her horticultural education. A read aloud book introducing youngsters to vegetable varieties, basis of gardening and what to watch out for to get a healthy crop. A beautiful way to inculcate the love of nature in children.



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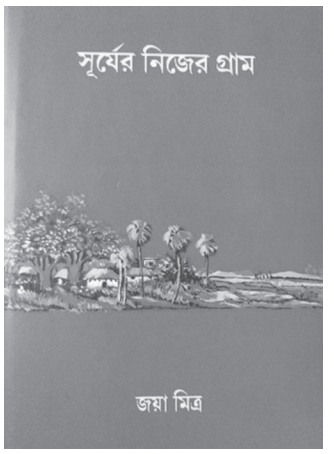
in order to survive.

To those of you who can read Bengali, do read this one. Let us dialogue about the cataclysmic changes around us. It is late already; who knows what happens if we wake up with a head of an octopus one day!

Priyatosh Dutta*

SHURJER NIJER GRAM (SUN'S OWN VILLAGE)
By Jaya Mitra
Suprokash, 2021, pp. 79, ₹ 150.00



This is a 'novel for adolescents', a thing that is hard to define. But the necessary condition for an adult writing a 'novel for the adolescents' is that the writer must return to her own adolescence, because years of growing up alter the life of the writer significantly as compared to the life projected in the story. Yet, the writer retains a flow of perspective on the world and life, and on the philosophical outlook. For Jaya Mitra, the foundation for the flow is '*Bhalobasa*' (love)—love for the environs and surroundings. This novel is a piece from the journey that this love entails. Similar such love abounds in other works by her too, especially in the works for children.

The story is told as seen by Suroj. Should we say that it is narrated or is it painted? The lead character in the story is Mother Nature itself. The crimson earth of Birbhum, trees like Saal, Mahua, Palash, Shimul, the water bodies and the river, a small hamlet called Kurumadi near a forest, the village that Suroj lives in, all of these are the characters in the story. And of course, such portrayal necessitates picture-words, a skill in which not only the writer is an expert, but she has also spent a few years in such a village. It is a village of indigenous people, the Santhals, and living amidst them are a few Bengali families. Suroj is from a joint family with his father, younger and elder uncles, grandpa, grandma, buDobaba, in it. This living together, a rare thing these days, with ups and downs, disputes, joys and pleasures, is portrayed well with descriptions of the relations between the siblings of Suroj, of the elders and their daily chores. And the world of Suroj is not just his family, it includes several Santhal friends, the entire village, the forest beyond the village, the river—everything. And that is why Suroj and his friends see no difference in Christmas, Sorohai or Durgapuja. They are all festivals of joy and celebration. They seek this pleasure in splashing around in the river, grazing the cattle, in cycling together when going to the school! Suroj and his friends enjoy life because they know how to be amazed. They are amazed when they see a baby bird coming out of a hatched egg, when a mother finch teaches its baby how to fly, when leaves fall from a Mahua tree, in the intoxicating red of the Shimul and Palash. They have joys because they know how to accept sorrows also. They are pained when big trees are felled! And in all these joys and sorrows they find the company of a teacher, Saikat, who they address as Saikat-da, whose classes they can never miss.

A wave of a different nature comes colliding on such a peaceful, quiet, remote village. Erosion begins. With trees chopped, earth torn apart, rock mines appear one after another, along with pollution and several diseases tagging along followed by the march of pharma-markets—things that Kurumadi had never witnessed before. This erosion enters the life of Suroj and others. The uncle and aunt of Suroj want their son to study in the English medium school in the city of Durgapur; they want to sell their land that produced rice. They do not want to find out what Suroj's beloved cousin, Gobindo, desires. The young ones are bewildered again wondering—why are adults so bizarre?

Suroj was even more taken aback when all others including the uncle and the aunt, gather courage to inform the eldest in the family, the aged one, buDobaba, that they want to go away from the village. Will he agree? In a remarkable settled gesture, buDobaba says, there was a time when we left our native place to come and settle here. You too have to leave. Go, stay well. Is this what is called wisdom?

When Suroj enjoys the sight of the koi fish walking on its edge on earth, or when catching the koi fish, Ronju-da tells him—you are destined to be a scientist when you grow up. And then after his sister Rasmoni met with an accident on the road, he decides to become a medical doctor someday. But all this was turned around by Dinu-da, the owner of the shop in the street corner. The way Dinu-da, an ordinary chap, leaves all his business behind and carries Rasmoni to the hospital, takes care of her while facing angry people—this impresses Suroj such that he ends up telling Rasmoni, 'You know what, who cares for a scientist or a doctor, it is far more important to be a decent person like Dinu-da.' Alongside the sorrow of his brother Gobindo leaving for Durgapur, nurturing the pleasant feelings of knowing a decent person, Suroj responds to his mother's call and returns back to his village—the hamlet that he will never leave.

*Review translated from Bangla by Laltu.

Indrani Barua

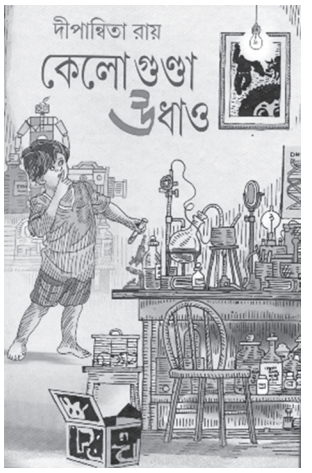
KELO GUNDA UDHAO (KELO RUFFIAN'S DISAPPEARANCE)
By Dipanwita Roy
Udayarun Publications, 2022, pp. 128, ₹ 250.00

True to the genre of science fiction, this volume is teeming with aliens and spaceships, time travel, robots, the future world and amazing scientific inventions that tempt wrong-doers and children alike. A wonderful collection of sci-fi short stories that will tantalize young minds.

The stories are told from the perspective of a child-hero who interacts with the adult world or even aliens on his own terms. In the title story '*Kelo Gunda Udhao',* the child Phuchka is not only annoyed with his father for making him work out sums on a holiday but also angry with Kelo, the ruffian, who bullies a poor old woman in the neighbourhood to evict her from her rented premises. Then Phuchka accidentally discovers something his father, a scientist, was working on in his laboratory. What will Phuchka do? Will he be able to punish Kelo? This intriguing story unfolds in a humorous way.

In 'Sandipan Sir's Pudding', the menace of wicked persons takes on a more sinister global character. Suddenly, children all over the world are afflicted with a mysterious virus that is making them turn violent. Governments are anxious to find the root cause. How is this virus injected in the children? What is the purpose? But who is involved? The story reminds us of all the violence that is done to

children in the real world and the role that populist fanatics play in injecting such violent thoughts on impressionable minds. A subtle warning that such violence may escalate to a devastating war.



'Ruku's Great-grandfather' explores the futuristic world which has its roots in the grim reality of deforestation and commercialization that are rapidly enveloping the world. It portrays a future (or not-so-future anymore) world where the most precious item is water; a world where humans travel in mini solar-powered air-borne vessels that have to be filled with oxygen as there is no oxygen in the environment any more. A world where old people and the very few dissenters either vanish or live in self-exile as lives Ruku's great-grandfather. The message is loud and clear for all—deforestation and wastage of natural resources need to stop, freedom of expression needs to be valued and guarded for the sake of future generations.

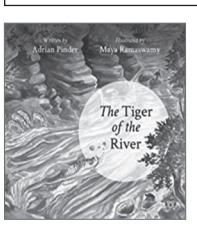
'Majaru's Horn', 'The Spaceship of Mithaipur' and 'Bruno Saheb's Camera' have alien and human interaction as their theme. Dipanwita's aliens are friendly beings and helpful to humans in many ways as they are superior in technology and science. But the author seems to say that humans too have a lot to give if they retain their humane qualities of love and compassion.

This same theme is repeated in another story 'Grandfather's Clock' where Amaresh *babu*, a High Court judge, tries to replace the services of his man Friday Gadai, with that of a robot and realizes in the end that robots are limited and can never substitute human love and affection. 'Suparno Sen's Shooting' is a totally different kind of story that is full of details and authentic vocabulary from the film world. It is a delightful story that keeps one guessing till the end.

The author's foray into science-fiction is an amazing bonus to her readers. This book is for young adult readers, but adults too will enjoy the very serious nuances of the stories. What is great about the author's style is that she never preaches. The freedom to analyse and form opinions remains ultimately with the readers. Moreover, Dipanwita is adept at mixing humour with all these ingredients and the balance is just wonderful. So is her deep understanding of the child's mind and that perhaps is the secret of her popularity with her young readers.

One wishes that the publisher had taken more care with the editing and typos when including the already published stories in the edition. However, despite this minor drawback, this is an enjoyable collection of sci-fi short stories from Bengal.

Book News ***Book News***



The Tiger Of the River by Adrian Pinder is the tale of a very special fish called Matisha that lives somewhere in the Kaveri River where the water rushes through a deep gorge. It is one of the largest and most beautiful freshwater fish on Planet Earth. In this dream-like story, follow the wonderful adventures of Matisha as she migrates upstream to lay her precious eggs. Illustrated beautifully by Maya Ramaswamy with vibrant colours, the invisible world that lives below the waters of the river and in the Western Ghats comes alive through the eyes of a fascinatingly beautiful, yet critically endangered species.

Speaking Tiger, 2022, pp. 36, ₹ 350.00

Children's Literature in Konkani

By Chetan Acharya

Konkani is spoken in four States—Goa and the coastal regions of Maharashtra, Karnataka and Kerala. There are 40 lakh speakers, of which about 16 lakhs are in Goa. There are five scripts used for writing Konkani—Malayalam, Kannada, Devnagari, Roman and Arabic. Recently, the Konkani community from Kerala decided to switch the script from Malayalam to Devnagari. With such diversity, an apparent challenge that one may encounter in Konkani literature is of transliteration.

When it comes to Children's Literature, there are multi-aspect challenges. A major factor is the outlook of parents. A thought that often dictates when it comes to buying a children's book is, 'If we are paying Rs. 100 for a book, we might as well get in return at least 10 stories. We can't be paying this much for a book with one single story.' The price factor depends upon the approach and intent of the publishers. In Konkani literature, there are two evident categories of publishers: activist publishers who are committed to ensure a wider outreach of Konkani language. The books brought out by such publishers are priced low. The other category of publishers aims at profit-making. Their books are often priced high and thus, the access is restricted and so is the outreach.

Publishing, especially Children's Literature, is mostly looked at as a pass-time and part-time activity (however, there is also a small section dedicatedly involved in some interesting work).

To look at the content, there is an evident trend of Panchatantra school of thought in children's books and stories and the influence continues to persist. Although there have been many litterateurs, rich writings and poetry in Konkani, the number reduces strikingly, when it comes to Children's Literature. Balkavi is one such prominent name. It was he who pioneered writing for children. He wrote keeping children in mind in the name of Balkavi and as Manoharrai Sardesai for adults, and was adored by Konkani readers. He writes,

Doobte hue Sooraj ne laal hokar kaha—
Mere diye din ka aapne kya kiya?

(The setting sun, flame red, asked—
What did you do, with the day that I gave you?)

This was not originally written for children, but now it has been published for children. Many of Sardesai's poems are for people across age-groups. The couplet has led me to mull over, 'Why is it, that every time, even if it is essentially the same thing, it *HAS* to be written differently for children and for adults?' In language, expression, metaphors or in the author's thought or intent, there is a deliberate distinction maintained. This is one of the crucial issues in Children's Literature. Don't we all, adults and children, live in the same world? Then why this discrimination?

Barring the couple of exceptions that I mentioned above, for various reasons, the popular and acclaimed writers have kept away from writing for children. Secondly, those who did attempt, could barely go beyond non-sensical rhymes:

Ud ud kawwa
Ud ud ud…
Pud pud machhli
Pud pud pud

(Fly…fly, O Crow...

fly, fly, fly…
Swim… swim, O Fish…
swim, swim, swim)

While I agree that non-sensical rhymes have their own role to play in Children's Literature, there is also a need for it to delve into a richer, more complex and diverse world of children's lives and thinking.

Konkani Bhasha Parishad (KBP) has been active in publishing literature for children. It is unfortunate however, that their efforts and enthusiasm have not been reciprocated when approaching government agencies for publication and dissemination support.

However, there is an active effort to publish quality Children's Literature; there are writing workshops and ones for illustrations being organized. Some other organizations have also been organizing workshops for government departments. These spaces offer and encourage an exchange of thoughts and ideas on Children's Literature, although there is much more scope for this discourse to further evolve.

Children's Literature in Gujarati

By Nrupesh Patel and Bhaval Dawda

To comment on the current status of literature in Gujarati, overall and on contemporary literary trends, would be a contentious matter. It would be pertinent, thus, to limit the scope of this write-up to sharing some contemplations on the current status of Children's Literature (CL), based on our experiences and engagement.

The scenario in Gujarati CL is not encouraging. There is no new publication in the genre to mention. When we were approached by the Eklavya team for this write-up, this was the prompt response that we had to offer. Realizing that it could be out of our scanty knowledge, we connected with our friend, who is closely involved in the Gujarati textbook development team and is in closer touch with all new publications. The response was the same. Their answer echoed what we had felt—no new arrivals!

It is difficult to name an event or a publication that could be considered a remarkable development in Children's Literature in Gujarati. There are indeed the celebrated works, from what could be referred to as the golden era, the literary gifts received from Gijubhai Badheka, Hariprasad Vyas, Ramanlal Soni, Jivram Joshi and others. But it has been three decades since! There was also a time, in the70s when some quality literature from foreign languages was translated into Gujarati. Neither those stories, nor any new additions are anywhere to be seen now. The only additions since then have been the *Panchatantra, Aesop's Fables*, stories from the Upanishads, *Akbar-Birbal*, *Dadima ki Kahaniyan* and fairy-tales from the West. It is mostly the moral stories, fairy-tales and re-prints of old books with 'so-called' better illustrations, that have been trending in the recent past.

To make Children's Literature more relatable, new songs and stories now have words like 'chocolate', 'ice cream' and vocabulary that is 'traditionally' deemed fit for children's world.

In the last couple of decades, the definition and quality of CL have evolved rapidly. The quality of CL in many regional languages has improved but Gujarati CL is still frozen in the old times. The most published and sold children's books are still the same as they were many decades ago. Many of them have lost relevance. Most of them are still recreated with very inferior quality material in terms of the look and feel of the book and also in terms of visuals and language. Children don't find them attractive. The love for the *bodhkathas* and moral stories has grown manifold. A picture book narrating one single story independently is still a distant dream.

English medium schools have created a massive difference in the choice of language for CL. Parents are now preferring English CL.

The only contemporary CL available is from government publishers such as the National Book Trust or by voluntary groups like Pratham Books, and ARCH (which has been publishing translations from Eklavya, Bhopal). The for-profit publishers, instead of dipping their toes into something new, are simply surviving by reprinting old books.

The most urgent need is CL for early readers, age group 3 to 10. We can safely say there is no CL available for this age group in Gujarati. We don't have simple stories which can support literacy programmes in the interior where Gujarati is a second language for children and the medium of teaching-learning in schools. Poem posters and reading cards are direly needed but seem like a long goal for us. We have not seen any new poem and rhymes being written that children can relate to and enjoy in recent times.

We seek original stories in Gujarati to read for the sheer joy of reading, stories that reflect day-to-day life incidents and observations; stories that connect children with their world and their feelings that are complex to recognize, acknowledge and accept. We seek stories that affirm the truth that children are in fact equally capable of thinking, questioning, bringing solutions and much more. Equally needed are stories that can address gender issues and break irrational societal norms and stereotypes. We seek *Jodknas* (rhymes) to experience the play of words, and poems to plunge into the world of imagination.

The challenges are many: most writers think that writing about a child or an animal story with some lesson to be learnt qualifies as children's literature. The biggest challenge and need in such a situation is to bring about a change in how we see children's literature. Another crucial need is to find and encourage young writers and artists with fresh ideas. At the same time, we need some experts who understand this and can help us in promoting such CL. What would also help greatly is a network of organizations that are working with children on a large scale. There is a dire need of co-creation, exchange and wider dissemination of knowledge about Children's Literature and of literature itself.

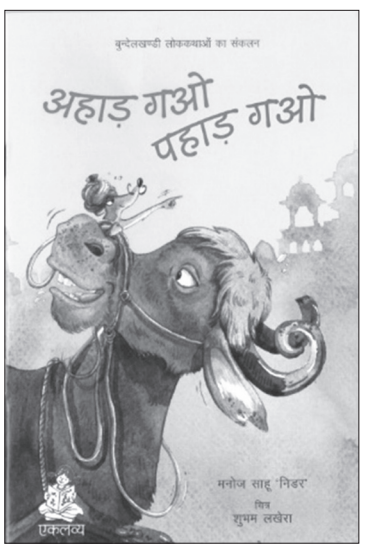
Currently, ARCH has brought out 25 books translated in Gujarati, originally published in Hindi/ English by Eklavya, Bhopal. We work in the community and we need such CL to work with children.

We are promoting quality CL through Pitara (a one stop bookstore setup by Eklavya, Bhopal). Many affordable and quality books from CBT, NBT, Pratham, Eklavya, Ektara, Jyotsna are a part of the collection there; for browsing and for sale. We also help institutions and schools in setting up and running libraries. In the last two years, we have seen a notable difference in the demand for quality Children's Literature.

This survey of the status of CL in Gujarati language leads one to ponder over possible next and actionable steps for ARCH. Acquisition and publication of titles would require an independent team, a fresh team and additional resources. These efforts would also require a fair understanding of publishing, disseminating and promotional processes. In fact, the immediate assistance needed is to build connect with authors and illustrators, who would be interested to contribute.

Archana Cynthia Gour

AHAD GAO PAHAD GAO
Compiled by Manoj Sahu 'Nidar'. Illustrations: Shubham Lakhera
Eklavya, 2021, pp. 32, ₹ 40.00



Language is not only a means of exchange of ideas, it is one of the most reliable mediums of expression. It is also an importance means for the development and social-cultural identity of a society. Without language, humans are incomplete and disjunct from their traditions. Hence, instead of imposing any language on students, in particular, or on people in general, they should be given the opportunity to select the language of their choice for instructional purposes.

The National Education Policy (NEP 2020) has advocated that as far as possible, the medium of education till at least grade 5 and at most till grade 8 should be the local/ regional or home language of the student. It is important to have a child's home language or mother-tongue as the medium of education in the early stages because this enables children to participate in learning activities freely and creatively. This also gives confidence to children to express themselves and thus, helps in the development of their vocabulary and understanding. There is ample research available that show that teaching-learning in the home language for children ages 3 to 8 years improves their comprehension, grasping and performance, even in higher grades. Nobel laureates too have now acknowledged that their understanding of Science and other subjects was deep and better because they were able to learn and present it in their mother tongues.

Use of mother tongue in the primary years of schooling helps improve access, retention and prevention of dropout rate [ERGO]. It is in light of the above scenario that I am reviewing the collection of *Bundelkhandi* stories *Ahad Gao Pahad Gao* by Manoj Sahu 'Nidar'. The collection brings to us stories from the rich *kissagoi* traditions of the area in tales of courage and humour.

The stories carve out the image of characters vividly. The women characters of *dukaria*, *kumharan*, *gwalan*, queen, etc., are very well detailed out. The dialogue between various characters is also sharp and witty. In a few stories, the traditional plot of repetition and addition of one new character or activity appear to be successfully creating a learning atmosphere for oral memory building. The suspense element is also intact in some other stories and leads the reader on to continue reading to satiate their curiosity.

Shubham Lakhera's illustrations are clear, attractive and encourage readers to decipher the story with their help.

As endorsed in the process of developing the Madhya Pradesh State curricular framework, the book is indeed a happy conjugation of a dedicated teacher-author and a brave publisher to invest in a non-scheduled language like Bundelkhandi. The stories have variety, and are full of wit, humour, joy and give a sense of peaceful happiness as you read them. At a nominal price of ₹ 40.00 the book is very accessible.

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Parag Honour List

By Lakshmi Karunakaran

The Children's Literature sector in India has seen many positive shifts in the last two decades. The market has grown, the work of the existing not-for-profit and for-profit publishers has strengthened, new voices and publishers have emerged, and efforts to strengthen the sector like children's book awards have increased. While the volume of increase in children's literature published is significant in languages such as English and Hindi, there is still much to do in other regional languages, both in terms of quantity and quality.

Parag, an initiative of the Tata Trusts, set up about two decades ago, supports the development of and access to good quality story books for children in Indian languages. It supports school and community libraries so that children have free access to books and an open and vibrant environment that supports reading for pleasure. Parag also works to nurture the children's literature sector through awards, professional courses and linking various stakeholders together through events for teachers, librarians and facilitators.

Recognizing this sector gap, Parag instituted the Parag Honour List (PHL) in 2019. It is a first of its kind effort in India, of an annual independently curated list of outstanding books published in Hindi and English across genres and age-groups. An independent jury with a deep understanding of children's literature reviews a number of entries and curates the PHL. The list aims to promote access to a comprehensive curated list of good quality children's literature that librarians, teachers, parents and children can refer to and read. Previous jury members have been writers, poets and sector experts, the likes of Usha Mukunda, Mini Shrinivasan, Sandhya Rao, Arvind Gupta, Samina Mishra, Arun Kamal, Gurbachan Singh, Prachi Kalra, Manoj Kumar, Teji Grover, and so on.

The Parag Honour List, first launched in January 2020 at the New Delhi World Book Fair, has so far received books from 30+ publishers on various themes for the age group 0-16 years. The books comprise original writings in the category of picture books, young readers and young adults, in fiction, non-fiction and poetry. The selection of the books is a year long process. A separate jury is constituted for both languages at the beginning of the year. The jury members review the books submitted by the publishers through the next 8 months, and arrive at a shortlist. They then meet for a deliberation and finalization of the Honour List in both languages. The list is then launched at the beginning of the next year and disseminated across schools, publishers, sector experts, book stores and government officials.

An important aspect of such an honour list of books is its relevance in shifting the larger discourse and understanding of creation, recognition, and thus readership of quality children's literature. Its larger intent being that such a list inspires better quality books to be produced and read, and that parents and practitioners have easy access to quality literature on diverse, age appropriate and contemporary themes.

Now in its fourth year, the PHL has so far featured over 135+ books in Hindi and English. As a part of dissemination efforts and increasing readership of these books, Parag constituted the Parag Book Box initiative. Every year after the honour list is announced, a call for application is sent out to under-resourced schools and community libraries who avail of the PHL book box. So far over 480+ libraries have thus been able to add the most outstanding books of the year to their collection, in some of the most remote locations across the country. Parag also disseminates them through children's literature festivals, by featuring the list in newspapers and magazines and engaging with practitioners/educators in building deeper understanding of recognizing and working with good books.

While PHL will continue to put out a carefully curated list of books every year, much effort needs to be made to help strengthen adaptation, especially in promoting such lists into schools and institution networks. Further, publishers need to invest in translating recognized books, helping good quality children's literature travel between languages and reach a wider audience.

This needs to be a collective effort, and we hope that the larger eco-system of publishers, educators, library practitioners, creators, schools, parents and readers can come together to make good quality children's literature accessible to all children.

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The Book Review Literary Trust set up in October 1989 to disseminate information about advances in knowledge and books, is a non-political, ideologically non-partisan organization, and seeks to reflect all shades of intellectual opinions and ideas.

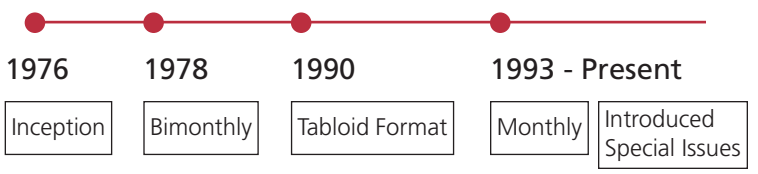
Objectives

- Publication of the monthly magazine *The Book Review*
- The running of such other magazines/publications;
- Organizing exhibitions of books;
- Organizing seminars on themes of relevance to the objectives of the Trust;
- Providing financial assistance for publishers to publish seminal works in several disciplines at subsidized prices;
- Awarding scholarships, prizes for meritorious research and publication;
- Undertaking publication, sale and distribution of books;
- Running freelance or syndicated columns in newspapers, magazines and the like.

The Book Review

The Book Review, India's first review journal in English, was started in 1976 by Chitra Narayanan, Uma Iyengar and Chandra Chari.

The Development of the Journal: A Brief Time Line



1. Set up to promote Indian publications and Indian authors, particularly those in the Indian languages;
2. Encourage and develop high-quality translations of works in the Indian languages;
3. Develop a culture of critical in-depth reviews, leveraging the expertise of the best in a given field;
4. Promote awareness of studies in special areas of concern by publishing special issues on Gender, Indian Languages, Children's Books, South Asia, International Relations, Politics, History, Media Studies.

Seminars

- Big Dams and Displaced People – January 1993
- Women Writing in India: From the 6th Century to the Present – August 1993
- The Role of Critical Reviews: An International Colloquium – February 1995
- Reviewing and the Publishing Industry – February 1996
- Subversive Sites: Women's Engagements with the Law – September 1996
- Anuvaad: Linking Literatures – October 1996
- Role of Critical Reviews: A Dialogue with Robert Silvers & Rea Hederman of *The New York Review of Books* – November 1997
- On Critical Reviewing – in New Delhi, Chennai and the University of Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, USA between 1993 and 1997
- International seminar on -'War Peace and Hegemony in a Globalized World' – 2006
- International Colloquium on – 'Superpower Rivalry in the 20th Century: Lessons for the 21st Century' – 2008
- The Role of The Public Intellectual, March 2015
- Questioning Paradigms, Constructing Histories: A Festschrift for Romila Thapar, March 2018

Lectures

- 1996 *Toward Freedom and Beyond* –Nikhil Chakravartty
- 1996 *A Small Craft Industry:* Reflections on Reviewing – Barbara Epstein
- 1997 *On Biographies and Kings* – Romila Thapar
- 1999 *Development as Freedom* – Amartya Sen (1st Nikhil Charavartty Memorial Lecture)
- 2004 *War Peace and World Hegemony in the 20th Century* – Eric Hobsbawm (2nd Nikhil Chakravatty Memorial Lecture)
- 2014 *To Question or Not to Question: That is The Question* – Romila Thapar (3rd Nikhil Chakravartty Memorial Lecture)

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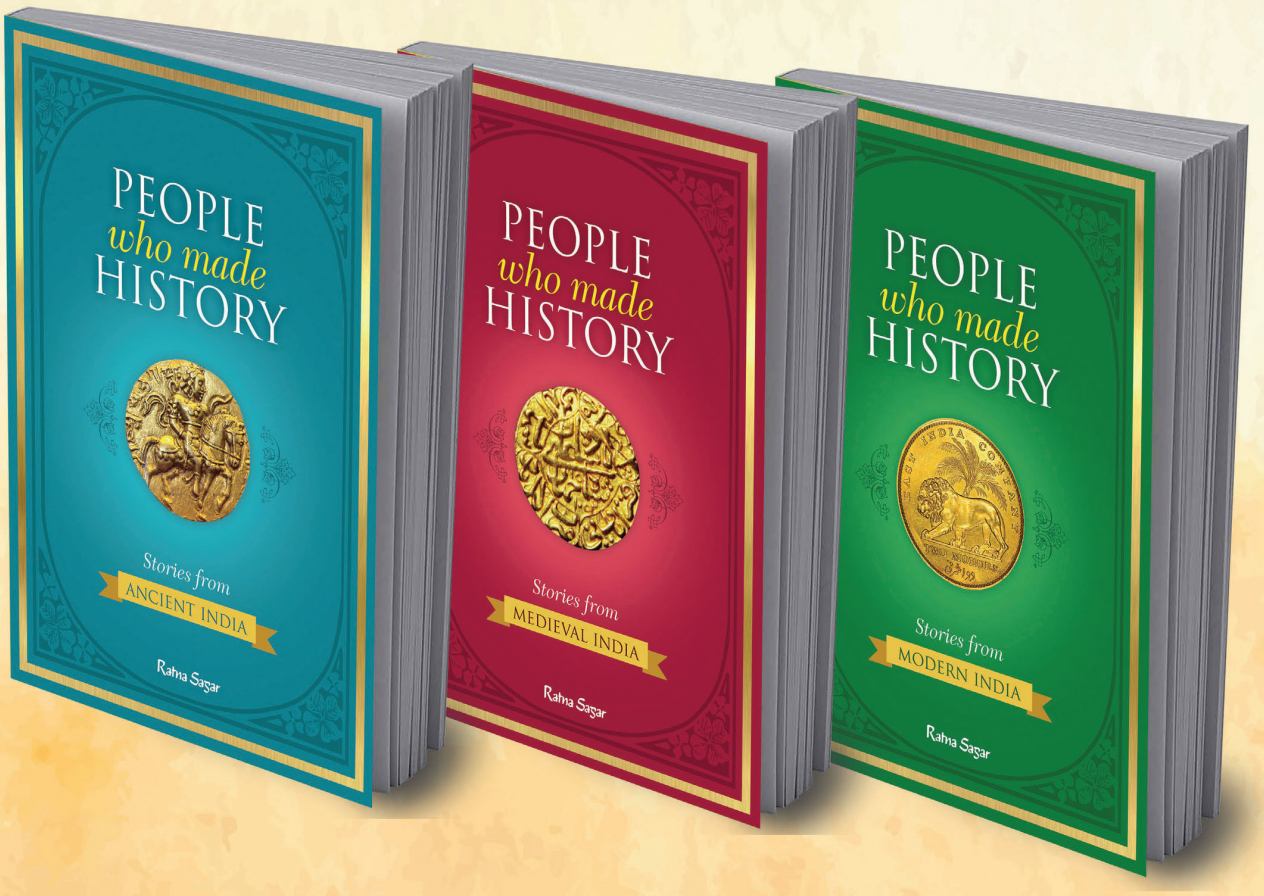

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